Understanding representations of low-income Chinese migrant workers through the lens of photojournalists

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a conceptual framework for reading representations of low-income Chinese migrant workers. This topic is currently relevant as migration trends continue to intensify in Asia. Guided by concepts from representation, cultural studies and visual anthropology, it proposes a fresh approach for understanding these images by speaking with image producers working in the genre of documentary photography. Three in-depth interviews are conducted, providing invaluable insight to thoughts and decision-making processes. The study is also supplemented by a visual analysis of photographs photojournalists have made, and this identifies gaps between a photographer's objectives and visual representation itself. It also reveals new ways of seeing, pointing to the potential for developing new perspectives in seeing in the Asian context. In the analysis, methodological and theoretical implications are discussed, reiterating the need to understand these people represented as it influences the way we perceive them in real life.

INTRODUCTION

In its marriage of aesthetic styles and narratives, the appeal of documentary photography offers viewing pleasure to a viewer, though its purpose is often to finally shed light on the lives of people who live on the fringes of society (Nichols, 1991; Rose, 2007). Historically, these images were also highly politically charged as they illuminated pockets of communities that epitomised prevailing social issues of inequality and injustice, thereby reflecting a society significantly divided by a rich-poor gap (Debord, 1970; Tagg, 1988).

In contemplating images, Barthes (1982) described its permanent quality as evidence of reality that once existed. For its visual power, photographs assume a role in 'historic realism' (Frosch, 2001) by gathering evidence from the world to make up the world (Rose, 2007). Documentary photographs in particular, were perceived to objectively capture events and reality in the belief that something has happened, and that the photographer was there to witness it when it occurred (Thomas, 2008). At the same time, its assumption of honourable and socially responsible intentions also gives it a legitimate power in the construction of truth and reality, as well as a true, impartial and reliable source of information (Nichols, 1991).

Yet, documentary photography can also be subjective insofar as the events and representations produced are related to personal interpretations of that moment (Hall, 1997; Nichols, 1991). At the heart of the practice is a tradition that is rooted in complex historical and institutional influences in which photographic reality is hardly impartial (Tagg, 1988). Here, the recognition of two diverse characteristics of documentary photography point to the tension between understanding a photograph as a depiction and as a representation (Slater, 1995).

Firstly, the image as a depiction of reality is known as the mimetic or reflectionist approach (Hall, 1997), or what Sturken and Cartwright (2001) conceptualise as the 'myth of photographic truth'. This approach is based on the premise that 'what can be seen can also be believed'. It is the belief in the camera's ability to capture reality by compressing time and infinite history into a two-dimensional matter. This serves as a critical visual element as it bears witness to an event as it actually happened (Imbrigotta, 2010; Knoch, 2006; Thomas, 2008). As a result, the authenticity of an image has widely been used and accepted in social contexts such as courtroom evidence (Jenks, 1995; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001).

On the other hand, though, is the view that the image is a representation, a transformation of reality mediated on paper, a highly coded and a manifestation of an all-pervasive power

(Jenks, 1995). Indeed, others too, recognise the image as more than just an observation of the world. For Tagg (1988), images are more than a fusion of semiotic codes; they are sites of struggle where social identities are constructed or subverted in relation to the process of domination and subordination (p. 30). Sontag (1979) on the other hand suggests that images are but mere shadows in Plato's Cave. As a result, she alludes that Man's existence to be in this Cave, unable to see the world clearly beyond what we gather from images. In other words, to her, the image is a constructed representation of the world, neither objective nor universal.

In light of this, this study takes the stand that a photograph is a system of representation. It cannot, and should not be reduced to its simple way of merely showing the world as it is. In fact, as a depiction, it is but a reductive view of the world (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001), further arguing against the belief that it is an exact objective description of the real world. Similarly, the image as a reflection or a depiction of reality has also been rejected for its naivety (Bourdieu, 1990a), as well as criticised by others such as Moller (2010) who, like Sontag (1979), point out that an image is not merely about who is in frame, but who has been left out and why. In addition, it is also important to take into account the historical and institutional influences surrounding the making of the image (Tagg, 1988), as well as the implicit social relationships mediated through it (Debord, 1994) because it involves the study of invisible power dimensions within the hegemony of discursive systems (Barthes, 1982).

Unfortunately, as a system of representation, photographs are never fully comprehended (Hall, 1997), reflecting the need for developing a framework that enables one to better read and understand visual representations. This study attempts to achieve this by considering images of low-income Chinese migrant workers as represented in documentary photography. It looks at the genre beyond its traditional purpose of garnering a public response towards social issues, and considers both the practice and product itself as dynamic and volatile sites of contestation and change. This draws our attention not only to 'what', but 'how' its subjects have been represented; these are crucial questions that need to be answered and understood, but have very often been neglected in the study of documentary photography (Nichols, 1991). More significantly, perhaps, is the fact that this study also attempts to take a step further in understanding 'why' these representations are made as such. It is important because to understand is to interpret, and this ultimately affects our perceptions of what is said about the human condition, and how we engage with the issue (Mohanty, 2000; Silverstone, 2007).

This study therefore attempts to fulfil a research gap by integrating theoretical literature from visual anthropology and concepts from representation to understand representations of low-

income Chinese migrant workers in the genre of documentary photography. It also draws guidance from cultural studies because it is a genre that is little understood as a cultural product, but no less insignificant because of its symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1983). In addition, I pay attention not only to these images present within a wider discursive system, but also to its producers who practise their craft in an ongoing conflict between artistic styles, ethical values, and societal relationships—these producers are also engaged in sites of unrest where power is almost always contested, subverted, and maintained (Tagg, 1988).

This study is organised into four sections. The first section reviews existing literature on current approaches to reading images and highlight discursive power and ideology inherent in social structures. I also critically examine shortcomings and propose a conceptual framework to meet the study's research objectives. Secondly I outline the methodology and reflect key considerations in employing these methods and means of analysis. The third presents key findings from the empirical data and in the final section, I wrap up with some conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Looking at images

In a critical focus of the image as a 'text', Barthes (1972) suggests that an image consists of two levels. The first is that which we see on the surface [denotative]; and beneath it, a second meaning which he terms the 'connotative'. It is this second meaning which are 'myths', containing a deeper level of other attributes and meaning inherent in the image itself. However, making sense of this 'myth' and what it represents can only come about through a familiar understanding of the cultural associations that come with it (Leeuwan, 2001, p. 97). In another way of looking at images, Berger (1972) posits that the camera's gaze is male, a way of seeing inherited from a long history and tradition of looking at the female nude in European art. As a result, it is usually characterised by a desire to possess and control. Berger's (1972) way of seeing, when applied to documentary photography, however becomes controversial as it transforms the practice from one that has moral underpinnings to one of exploitation. For example, it has raised issues of voyeurism (Sontag, 1979), visual exploitation (Ballerini, 1997; Joanou, 2009), as well as the debate over appropriate representation through objectivity, accuracy and impartiality (Bauder, & Gilbert, 2009).

Images are also often accompanied by captions which provide more than sufficient description to explain its meaning behind it (Chaplin, 2005; Sontag, 1979). This provision of text means that it should not be necessary to speak with photographers to gain a deeper understanding of the circumstances surrounding the image as it completes the image by grounding it in context (Rose, 2007).

These attempts at understanding images, however, have their limitations, as Berger (1972) concedes, "the relationship between what we see and what we know is never settled" (p. 7). Furthermore, Hall reminds us that captions are socially constructed, selected from a diversity of meanings, and then ultimately amplified (as cited in Chaplin, 2005). As a result textual interpretation is limited as it is incapable of explaining the essence of what an image tries to express (Pinney, 1990). Contrary to Barthes (1972), Hall (1997) further posits that meaning is not fixed in the representation itself. Rather, individuals subjectively make sense of them based on their own backgrounds and experiences. Although he also offers the view that representation is a dialogue in which the exchange of meanings would make more sense to individuals who share similar cultural backgrounds, one still struggles to make accurate meanings of images because they change across time and context (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986; Farrar, 2005).

Reading and making sense of representations in a vacuum is therefore a one-sided affair, which has the potential to misunderstand and misquote the intended meaning embedded by producers of these images. As a result, many (Edwards, 2011; Poole, 1997) have emphasised the necessity of speaking with image producers in order to address the risk of erroneous interpretation. Such a means of approaching images is one that tries to resolve the tension between what a photo shows and what it really means, yet it is one that academia has not sufficiently explored (Chaplin, 2005).

This study tries to address this gap by attempting to read images beyond what they appear to mean. Firstly, it selects the cultural approach—that is, treating images as a representation of shared everyday experience and communal beliefs (Carey, 1989; Lister, & Wells, 2001). This is in contrast to adhering to a tradition of the transmission view [images as a means to pass on information] (Carey, 1989), one that I reject for its inability to consider other external circumstances of meaning-making in experiencing this world. I also reject the semiotic approach [which narrowly but critically focuses on signs and symbols in an image] as it takes for granted the assumption that cultural meanings are universal and understood by all who are familiar with contemporary cultural material (Leeuwan, 2001).

In fact, the cultural approach is advantageous because as a product that is embedded within wider intersecting political, socio-economic and cultural spheres of influences (Campbell, 2009; Edwards, 2011; Poole, 1997; Sontag, 1979), photographs cannot be read singularly out of these contexts. They are "sites of intersecting and contested histories, intentions and inscriptions" (Edwards, 2011, p. 176). It is this connection with the world and its complex relationships with specific social relations that must be taken into account. As a consequence, it is capable of investigating cultural processes by interrogating underlying interests (Jenks, 1995), as well as intentions and motivations that were present during the production of the image (Bourdieu, 1983). This is especially significant if we are to engage with image producers to understand their thought processes behind making and publishing an image. In a bid to stress this importance of a cultural approach, Carey (1989) further posits that it not only fosters cohesion in a society, it also creates an awareness of our identity, and how we see ourselves participating in the world based on the roles we see ourselves playing.

A cultural approach to understanding images

When situated in a cultural context, images are constructed signs and symbols which perform its role as a meaningful language that connects (Barthes, 1972; Clifford, 1986; Geertz, 1973; Grasseni, 2011). To put it more explicitly in Geertz's (1973) words—"human thought is social" (p. 361), suggesting that images are a means by which members in a society communicate, interact, maintain relationships, and share experiences, thoughts and ideas with one another (Bourdieu, 1990a; Carey, 1989). They are not only mediated outward expressions of thought, but also projections of community ideals which suggest the existence of a particular symbolic order, as well as evidence of an organic social process (Carey, 1989; Slater, 1995). For example, Chalfen's (2003) study on images of deceased pets reveals the importance of kinship in Japanese society, as well as demonstrates the power of representation as a means of communicating social rituals.

A history of academic thought in social and cultural theory, however, has placed too much emphasis on the image as a means of depicting reality, therefore falling into a positivist approach to understanding visual culture (Slater, 1995). An unfortunate consequence of this is that it supports the modern epistemology of visual culture in the contemporary west, giving rise to a positivist attitude towards studying the world (Jenks, 1995). This positivist approach to anthropology and sociology is one that Geertz (1973) embraces, but has also been severely critiqued by other authors because it ignores the dynamism of culture (Clifford, 1986; Fabian, 1971), undermines reflexivity (Pinney, 1990; Pink, 2003), and fails to consider limitations of the visual, in that they are not exactly reality per se, but only imitations of it (Tyler, 1986). In addition, I concur that the positivist approach is problematic because it has the potential to neglect an intensive investigation of the world and life in relation to the visual. Such an approach is myopic, it being unable to appreciate the fact that the experience of 'realism' varies across individuals who offer interpretations based on one's background and cultural influences (Slater, 1995).

The structural and historical circumstances surrounding the practice of documentary photography and its producers—photojournalists—should also be taken into account in order to allow for a deeper understanding and a more holistic study of 'texts'. This is significant because the study of culture not only involves looking at 'texts' and symbols, but also the conditions under which it is being produced and reproduced (Clifford, 1986; Tagg, 1988). With respect to this, Bourdieu (1983) offers an insightful observation in his theoretical framework of *field analysis,* whereby photojournalists are situated in diverse positions, interconnected and in conflict within and throughout different structured spaces (Swartz,

1997). This has its merits in reminding us that in the dynamism of culture and society, producers are relatively positioned against wider social structures of power and society (Johnson, 1993). Furthermore, it also helps one recognise underlying dimensions of power relations mediated through how they are being constructed in the wider context of society (Hall, 1997; Jenks, 1995; Tagg, 1988).

Power dimensions in cultural production

Documentary photographers work within discursive sites, which are entrenched in a complexity of relationships, "by and through which pleasure and power, ideologies and utopias, subjects and subjectivities receive tangible representation" (Nichols, 1991, p. 10). Foucault's theory of power and discourse offers a way of deciphering power dimensions. He examines how discourse is being constructed and sustained by participants in this regime (Morgan, 2010). This stresses the constructed nature of knowledge within hegemonic regimes of power and ideology. Although this dominant power is more often than not hidden, it is displayed through an adherence to prevailing ways of expression in society (Matheson, 2005). It is also further reproduced and sustained when one takes for granted and does not deviate from such practices, therefore supporting existing power structures and dominant discourses in society. As a result, a universal 'truth' [if indeed there is one] is never understood or discovered (as cited in Hall, 1997).

Bourdieu on the other hand asserts that power is relative, relational and dependent on its relationship with the social structure (Swartz, 1997). This means that a discourse hangs because individuals internalise a *habitus* [or 'cultural unconscious' or 'mental habit'] (Swartz, 1997) and then unconsciously reproduce this practice based on how he is socially conditioned to begin with (Bourdieu, 1990b).

Both Foucault and Bourdieu recognise the all-pervasiveness of power historically constructed and maintained by the interest of certain groups within wider social structures. Their differences lie in the fact that while the former gives weight to how this power reproduces and maintains the status quo of discursive systems, the latter emphasises its arbitrariness, derived from various social relationships in society (Swartz, 1997). Applied appropriately, this study can benefit from crystallising essentials from both concepts of power in understanding representations as cultural signs and symbols.

For example, Bourdieu's relational power can explain the fact that photojournalists are not cultural producers working independently out of an institutional framework that determines

the nature of their work (Johnson, 1993, p.10). As a result, they are situated within sites of contestations where they struggle with themselves, amongst their peers, wider society, and also with the people they have chosen to represent (Johnson, 1993; Swartz, 1997). Herein lies the recognition that it is photojournalists' relationship with the people around them that gives or strips them of their power to represent. At the same time, however conceptually versatile relational power may be, Bourdieu offers no guidance on how it can be applied in context (Swartz, 1997). As a result, it falls short of explaining the worldviews or ideologies that guide photojournalists in the ways they choose to produce meaning in their documentary essay. Here, it may thus be advantageous to supplement this limitation by using Foucault's recognition that photojournalists operate and produce images within constructed hegemonic discursive flows of power.

In another means to understand power dimensions, Hall (1997) proposes to consider meaning "less in terms of 'accuracy' and 'truth', and more in terms of an effective exchange— a process of translation, which facilitates cultural communication" (p.11). Similarly, du Gay (1997) acknowledges his view by recognising the existence of power hierarchies in various cultural spaces producers and consumers of images reside in. At the same time, like others (Berger, 1972; Bourdieu, 1990a; Sontag, 1979), Hall (1997) also highlights the gross inequality of power in the ongoing conflict between artistic styles, ethical values, and a hierarchy of seeing at the heart of documentary photography production.

In a nutshell, the complex characteristics of cultures bring out spheres of influences whereby power intersects and interacts in dynamic ways. This means that one is constantly challenged in trying to make accurate sense of meanings individuals create (Carey, 1989; Chamboredon, 1990). It also reinforces the fact that there is little point in employing scientific logic or a positivist approach to interpret accurate meanings out of these images as they will be interpreted differently across context and time.

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING IMAGES

To briefly conclude, the literature above highlights issues in understanding representations. It also points out the risk of passing a one-sided and biased judgement based on personal interpretation. In addition, one is reminded that in the on-going process of globalisation and modernity, a cultural project is no longer about describing social realities (Tyler, 1986) or studying inaccessible exotic worlds (Marcus, & Fischer, 1999). Rather, it increasingly involves studying and interacting with people of similar socio-economic and intellectual standing (Marcus & Fischer, 1999), suggesting that fresh perspectives will be required to understand them.

How then, may we best approach these difficulties in reading and understanding representations in cultures? In her study on bullfighting, Pink (1999) conceptualises visual representations as interactive and intersecting sites of aesthetic styles and narratives. Yet its meanings derived from these representations are still subjective, inconsistent, and largely open to interpretation. Pinney (1998) suggests that we should be systematic, critical and reflexive by looking at representations from all possible angles and dimensions. Becker (1998) too tells us to consider each picture in documentary photography as an incomplete jigsaw, to identify underlying common themes, and then positing possible hypotheses in making sense of its meaning. However these suggestions are not helpful in revealing why certain things were left out. A photograph is not innocent of values and power (Nichols, 1991); without an insight to what the thought processes were or how decisions were being made, we still live Plato's Cave, or in Tyler's (1986) words, an 'illusory realism'.

A number of studies out there also explore the truth and social value of documentary photography (Frosch, 2001; Moller, 2010; Parvez, 2011; Taylor, 2000). Yet, I posit that this reflective or mimetic approach (Hall, 1997) is less significant than taking into consideration the role of image producers. This is because reality on the ground cannot be truly represented in text, and "even less can the text, by means of its form, dictate its interpretation, for it cannot control the power of its readers" (Tyler, 1986, p. 135). There therefore needs to be more guidance in understanding visual representations beyond 'truth' dimensions. Constant reminders to be reflexive, to be aware of the context and limitations of representation can only take us so far (Pink, 2003), because one ultimately does not know an image-producer's intentions, appreciations and perceptions (Bourdieu, 1990a). This study will therefore explore a means of understanding representations of low-income Chinese migrant workers by investigating the motivations and intentions behind photojournalists who shoot them.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

This study deviates from photographers who are commissioned to shoot for a news story or a news organisation. This is because prevailing bureaucratic newsroom practices mean that images are usually filtered and finally selected based on an agenda that serves an overarching corporate directive (Allan, 1999). Instead, I choose to focus on photojournalists who produce work out of their own initiative.

The research objectives for this study therefore attempt to fill the gap in contemporary research. They are:

  i.   To look at the motivations and intentions behind meaning construction in making the making of these images.
  ii. To understand distance and power relations during interactions between photographer and subject matter.
  iii. To identify the gaps between producers' objectives and the degree to which these representations have achieved them.

As the literature suggests, documentary photography is driven by a personal commitment to highlight communities that live on the fringes of society (Nichols, 1991). In light of this, what are these photojournalists trying to achieve through their projects on low-income Chinese migrant workers? This informs the following research question:

RQ1: What are the motivations and intentions behind the production of these images?

Relationships are usually, though not always formed in a photographer-subject matter relationship (Newton, 1998). Hall (1997) recognises this as the interaction and intersection of different cultural spheres, and when this happens, power dimensions and differences begin to be evident. Yet for independent photojournalists who practise their craft in a 'dominant cultural order' (Hall, 1980, p. 134), the tension is between adhering to conventional discursive ways of representation and deviating from the norm to 'encode different meanings in a photograph' (Lister, & Wells, 2001, p. 79). How then, do we understand underlying dimensions of power relations mediated through the process of image-making? This drives the next research question:

RQ2: How do photographers negotiate distance and power with their subject matter?

Finally, it is hoped that these questions will address the last research question:

RQ 3: What implications do these practices mean for representations of the Other in the non-western context?

As a researcher trying to achieve the above research objectives, I attempt to participate in and closely engage with the research process. I recognise that this subjectivity will be challenged by Geertz (1973), who takes the position of studying of culture like a positive objective science. However, even though it denies the opportunity of fully understanding a universal knowledge and truth (Clifford, 1986), the subjective approach is one that I am inclined to take, for it encourages the importance of adopting reflexivity (Pinney, 1990), as well as be observant to the "intractable contradiction, paradox, irony and uncertainty in the explanation of human activities" (Marcus, & Fischer, 1999, p.15). In addition, it also enables one to recognise the constructed nature of cultural inquiry (Pink, 1999), therefore pointing to the difficulty of operating out of a discursive regime (Fabian, 1971; Moore, 1990).

Similarly, other visual anthropologists also support the idea that the study of other cultures is best understood in context and through a researcher's involvement in the subject (Clifford, 1986; Tyler, 1986; Rabinow, 1986). This is seen in Dominy's (1993) and Farrar's (2005) ethnographic research, both of whom have chosen this approach to better understand the communities they come into contact with.

Finally, this study is currently appropriate, especially in a time whereby labour migration will continue to intensify as Asia's economies further develop and expand (Kaur, 2010; Stalker, 2008). It therefore necessitates knowing how to read Chinese migrant workers in images, so as to reach a better understanding of the Other in our midst (Mohanty, 2000). This is important because if photojournalists operating in Asia still hope to make claims on behalf of their subject matter or inspire change, then the ways in which they do so necessarily spells implications for the practice of documentary photography in Asia.

METHODOLOGY

Research strategy

This section outlines the approach and justification for the overall methodology employed. Central to it is the integration of a visual analysis and in-depth interviews for a richer and sounder study (Esterberg, 2002). A total of three images [one from each photo essay] were selected for visual analysis. Three in-depth interviews were then conducted in an attempt to address the assertion that the analysis of images cannot be limited purely to the scrutiny of the visual; one must also take into account how meaning is produced and interpreted in context (Lister, & Wells, 2001; Rose, 2007; Sturken, & Cartwright, 2001).

Research design

Firstly, images of low-income Chinese migrant workers were randomly searched through independent galleries, websites, think tanks, blogs and websites such as *PDN photo online*, *Z-reportage*, *Panos Pictures*, *VII Magazine*, *Invisible Photographer Asia* and *Magnum Photo Agency*. Migrant workers may be portrayed in any setting such on public transportation, at the workplace or home. However, they had to be part of a series in a documentary photo essay, and not individual one-off photographs. Their producers were then identified through their contact details available online. I also depended on personal contacts and snowballed my request to reach out to regional photojournalists who have done work or have an interest in low-income Chinese migrant workers. The process generated a long-list of potential respondents and a few were randomly selected for a pilot to test the interview schedule.

Pilot

Three interviews were conducted for the pilot. The experience from the pilot study revealed certain weaknesses in the interview schedule and analysis methods. Both were later adjusted for this study. For example, the first questionnaire appeared to be too long, resulting in some half-hearted answers. The general questions were reduced and replaced with others that made specific reference to one or two images. This made it easier for respondents to describe their thought process during the making of the image.

Interestingly, the results also revealed that respondents embarked on their projects because they were inspired by their own family backgrounds and experiences. In fact, one shared that these migrants reminded him of his great-grandparents who arrived in Singapore many years ago:

In my work as a photographer, I constantly find myself drawn to themes and subjects that are personal or familiar to me. I find stories of the modern day Chinese migrants intriguing because it is in many ways the story of my grandparents leaving their home more than half a century ago.

Although in-depth interviews are not meant to draw large generalisations across a population (Berger, 1998), recurring thoughts and feelings about personal family stories from the pilot suggest that 'family' is an important theme to look out for. This choice is also timely and relevant because of the problem of 'orphaned' children growing up without parental guidance when parents leave for work in the city (Li, 2012). Thus, the families that Chinese migrant workers in China [*min gong*] leave behind have become a significant social issue in China today, reinforcing my decision to focus on denotations of 'family' and 'home' as represented in these images.

While the above decision follows Lister and Wells' (2001) proposal to interrogate the reasons behind choosing the images for a study, there is also a level of subjectivity invested into the research process. Yet, I defend this involvement, as my respondents are not only informants, but also partners in helping me understand their universe (Marcus, & Fischer, 1999).

My archive of photo essays also expanded when, at the end of each interview, respondents also provided suggestions of who I should speak to and where else I can find a variety of representations of Chinese migrant workers. Notably, some of these images were not available online, as they were not considered by their producers to be worthy of publication. Here, I had to request that they share these images with me personally, after reassuring them about confidentiality and copyright issues.

Sampling

Images

The pilot helped me shortlist three photo essays that represented low-income Chinese migrant workers and their families in a variety of ways. These included representations of them in their living quarters [*China's Rat Tribe* by C. Sim], on-the-go [*Chinese on a Train* by F. Wang] and the families they leave behind [*Empty Chairs* by J. Liu]; see figures 1-3 below[1].

One image was selected from each essay. Here, captions were useful in indicating that there exists the underlying theme of 'family', supporting the fact that textual interpretation still has its merits in explaining the visual (Rose, 2007; Sontag, 1979). At the same time, I kept in mind that I would be able to secure an interview with these photojournalists and that they should adhere to the following criteria as elaborated below.

Figure 1: China's Rat Tribe

Source: Chi Yin Sim

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[1] Permission for reproduction was sought during the interviews

Figure 2: Empty Chairs

Source: Liu Jie

Figure 3: Chinese on the Train

Source: Wang Fuchun

Image producers

Photojournalists should:

i. Consider themselves documentary photographers or photojournalists. They may be employed by a news media organisation, but the particular documentary story selected for this study must have been produced out of one's own initiative and motivation.

ii. Have worked on, or are working on the subject matter of low-income Chinese migrant workers in any part of the world.

Procedure

Visual analysis

Barthes' visual semiotics was chosen as the preferred means of analysis. Although Whitely (as cited in Rose, 2007) suggests that compositional interpretation has its merits in critically engaging the visual, it is inappropriate here as it does not take into account how images construct meaning in the broader ideological system of the status quo (Lister, & Wells, 2001; Rose, 2007). Instead, semiotics is useful in understanding images as representations, which are in itself an 'extended system of signs and symbols' (Lister, & Wells, 2001, p. 73). It also encourages us to understand images as 'codes' that need to be dissected to reveal hidden power inequalities and social differences in a culture (Hall, 1980; Rose, 2007).

I constantly reminded myself of the need to be reflexive, to observe and interrogate the data holistically, as well as be systematic and meticulous during the process of visual analysis (Collier, 2001; Rose, 2007). This stems from the understanding that as an observer, I come to look at images with a preconceived set of beliefs and experiences which will potentially affect my interpretation of the images (Lister, & Wells, 2001).

Interviews

An open-ended semi-structured interview was preferred over a structured one as questions had to be adjusted according to each photo essay. For example, C. Sim [*China's Rat Tribe*] provided me with an abstract of a previous interview she did with *PDN photo online* as some questions overlapped. In this case, the abstract was useful and also allowed me to generate follow-up questions to probe deeper into an elaboration of her feelings and motivations. This open-endedness was also an advantage as it means that she was able to describe her complex thoughts and feelings in her own words (Silverman, 1993).

An email was sent to each respondent requesting for their permission to be interviewed. After ensuring that they fulfill the above set of criteria, they could choose how they would like to conduct the interview—over the phone, over Skype or by instant messaging. They were also informed of confidentiality issues, and that they could choose to remain anonymous or depart from the study at any point in time without giving any reasons.

I have never met any of my respondents personally, but had a brief impression of them through friends and colleagues who knew them on first-name terms. For example, my snowballing effort led me to a personal contact who put me in touch with F. Wang [*Chinese on a Train*]. The photographs in this essay do not come with captions; however, in some ways they indicated to me that these were images of low-income Chinese migrants.

Indeed, through this personal contact, I understood that F. Wang has never once mentioned that he was focusing on Chinese migrants. Yet, his interest is definitely the diversity of people he meets on the third-class trains—most of whom are low-income migrant workers who can only afford the cost of a third-class hard-seat ticket. Having this background knowledge was advantageous as it suggested that a one-to-one chat in confidence would be more appropriate than subjecting respondents to a focus group study. It would enable me to concentrate my efforts on asking the 'whys' and the 'hows' individually (Gaskell, 2000), as well as make specific inquires about a particular image.

Furthermore, I anticipated that some of them might be sharing ethical concerns in hindsight, which would not be appropriate for sharing in an open setting. A thematic coding and analysis was preferred over a narrative analysis as it allowed me to categorise similar topics and themes from a diversity of viewpoints from the interview results (Esterberg, 2002; Flick, 1998; Richards, 2005). The narrative analysis was considered in hindsight from the pilot; it is a useful means to analyse open-ended, semi-structured interviews, and can offer insight to the social contexts respondents live and shoot (Esterberg, 2002). However, with respect to the interviews conducted in this study, responses were to the point and formal, with no room for discussing other aspects of respondents' experiences.

Operational terms

RQ1:

The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* defines *motivation* as 'the general desire or willingness of someone to do something' (oed.com, n.d.). This 'general desire or willingness' is further developed upon, based on Calhoun's (2008) examination of liberal ethics and charity to help explain why photojournalists do what they do. In other words, *motivation* is explicitly understood to encompass intrinsic impetus of duty, love and care.

The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* defines *intention* as the 'the ultimate purpose; the aim of an action' (oed.com, n.d.). In other words, a conscious objective photojournalists hope to achieve or accomplish. Similarly, this is further developed upon based on Calhoun's (2008) appropriation of consequentialism, and is explicitly understood to examine documentary photography as an action carried out in the pursuit of good outcomes.

RQ2:

Distance is operationalised in terms of du Gay et al's (1997) 'circuit of culture' in which individuals are either within or out of a particular cultural sphere. In other words it is understood as the literal distance and cultural spaces that photojournalists and their subject matter share when they come into contact with one another.

Power is operationalised in terms of Newton's (1998) visual behavioural concepts of visual intrusion, visual theft and visual rape. The first is the act of taking photographs in situations where the camera is not welcomed; the second, where a photographer shoots without his subject's knowledge or permission; and the last, photographing against subject's will.

Potential limitations of methodology

The integration of methods was to ensure that understanding representations also involved understanding its relationship with meaning and its construction in wider cultural spheres. Both means of inquiry—visual analysis and in-depth interviews—however, have their limitations, for semiotics and language are extended systems of signs (Lister, & Wells, 2001; Morgan, 2010). This means that as constructed conventions within the broader social context, it can be difficult to decipher meaning out of coded discursive systems. This rings true for an interview I had to conduct in Mandarin. While I had endeavoured to translate the transcript as accurately as possible, some meaning could have been lost along the way.

Furthermore, the scientific rigour of in-depth interviews has often been criticised because the circumstances under which the interview took place may colour its results (Silverman, 1993).

Yet, these limitations do not render in-depth interviews as an irrelevant means of inquiry. Holstein and Gubrium (1997) further note that the socially constructed climate of in-depth interviews is not so much to lead respondents on in a particular direction, but to generate an environment favourable for them to think deeper and further. In the context of this study, it has demonstrated itself to be a useful means of communicating with photojournalists in confidence. In a similar example, Lutz and Collins (1993) have also utilised in-depth interviews to supplement their content analysis of *National Geographic* images and the editorial processes behind.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Images in culture

The social value of images in the genre of documentary photography
One of the research objectives of this study is to understand the motivations and intentions of photojournalists. Contrary to the belief that documentary photographers jump into the genre with great aspirations of bringing about social and political change (Tagg, 1988), the interviews reveals that motivations for capturing low-income Chinese migrant workers actually stem from a personal history of life's experiences. For example, for F. Wang (personal communication, July 3, 2012), it started out with an employment stint at the railway company, which later developed into a long-term professional focus on low-income migrant workers on the train. J. Liu (personal communication, July 14, 2012) on the other hand shared that Chinese migrant workers are a group of people that is close to his heart because his parents were farmers who migrated to the city. No respondent explicitly articulated that they were motivated by intrinsic values of love, care and duty. However, from the conversations, it was modestly implied that they were generally concerned about the welfare and grievances of a forgotten pocket of humanity. As C. Sim articulates,

> *A lot of Beijingers don't realise that there is a world underneath... and they were labeled shu zu [Rat Tribe] by Jin Hua Shi Pao early last year and I thought that was rather unkind.*

These responses indicate that they were motivated by a sense of social purpose in bringing to light current trends and issues in Chinese society, suggesting that the sense of social consciousness and justice still exist today, as is typical of documentary photography. To a large extent, this sense of social purpose has been translated in their pictures:

In *Figure 1*, one is called to observe the background which depicts a cramped bedroom. The bed that takes up the entire length of the bedroom, the grey walls, makeshift curtains, and clothes around the room are signs of squalid conditions. This is also a sign of dankness and discomfort which in turn bring to mind the kinds of lives they lead—not entirely luxurious or comfortable. These visual denotations are easily recognised as signs of economic hardship because of a shared cultural understanding of what poverty and destitution should look like (Barthes, 1972). As a result, it enables a viewer to be cognizant of the economic struggles migrant workers face on a daily basis, though its final emotional effects on audiences may yet be unknown. Questions of ethics and morality may then arise from such a portrayal. On one hand, we may now be more aware of the human condition; but on the other hand, the photographer and viewer may derive a voyeuristic and possessive pleasure from looking at people who are less fortunate (Berger, 1972; Sontag, 1979).

The choice of representation, however, stems from honourable motives. The decision to make environmental portraits instead of straight portraits was deliberately made in order to take into account the environment in which her subject matter lived in (C. Sim, personal communication, July 3, 2012). This was in fact an attempt to humanise her subject matter through representations of the underground living conditions which reveal a life that is hardly comfortable. As a result, this choice of visual representation not only visualises the reality of poor housing conditions migrant workers live in (Shen, & Huang, 2003), it also rightly brings out her objectives in telling a consistent story of hardship and adversity at the grassroots level. Furthermore, what I also learn is her respect for their diligence, dignity and desire to move up the social ladder driven by a sense of purpose in life. Although she has tried to represent these positive qualities, it may not have been evident, for it is unlikely that one would be able to identify signs of resilience just from looking at a woman sitting in her sparsely furnished bedroom.

Figure 2 highlights conflicting interpretations in reading and understanding images and its producer's intended meaning, thus concurring with the literature on the importance of speaking with image producers (Edwards, 2011). On one hand, although I have interpreted the image based on how I have been socially routinised to understand it (Lister, & Wells, 2001), her intention to express a sense of social purpose was achieved to a large extent—this

is seen through my precise reading of representations of migrant workers' lives of hardship and adversity. On the other hand, a degree of misunderstanding still exists because there is a hint of voyeurism and I was unable to tell if she was motivated by an honourable social purpose. As a consequence, this may mean that in visually representing an economically disadvantaged pocket of society, positive attributes of their humanity must be easily identified if not migrant workers run the risk of visual exploitation. Naturally, one may be able infer, but not all viewers are necessarily sensitive to the positive aspects, or will they all come to the same conclusion because people across different cultures and contexts interpret differently (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986; Farrar, 2005).

In contrast, *Figure 3* does not show the environment—crowd and clutter in the background, if any, have been left out. Instead, here is an image that does not display squalor or struggle; neither can one draw relationships to a particular social issue or human condition based on denotations of a man and woman in bed. The degree of intimacy suggests that they are a couple in a romantic relationship. It draws our attention to connotations of intimacy, love, engagement and comfort. Again, meaning is constructed from cultural conventions, based on how we have been acculturated to recognise and accept meanings of love (Barthes, 1972). This representation does not conform to the conventions of documentary photography; its signs bring to mind a positive aspect of migrant workers by representing them in a manner that reminds us of their humanity and need for love and intimacy. Similarly, I also have my suspicions of voyeurism because the couple's gaze at one another implies an obliviousness that translates into a much-needed desire for space and privacy. As a result, it indicates that any camera presence would be unwanted, much less welcomed. The close-up shot also indicates a photographer's position that is too close for comfort, raising questions if this photograph has been staged.

The image was indeed shot without permission or knowledge (F. Wang, personal communication, July 3, 2012). Although F. Wang harboured no ill intentions, the couple's displeasure that their space and privacy had been invaded nonetheless became a moment of tension. He also shared that he often tries to bring out positive connotations of humanity by making the effort to shoot moments that represent meaning and life—evidence of intrinsically good motivations behind his practice. To a large extent, this philosophy has been achieved through my similar interpretations of how these migrant workers have been represented.

The analyses reveal varied personal reasons for embarking on a documentary photography project, and that motivations stem from a genuine concern and a sense of social

consciousness, as is characteristic of documentary photography. Arguably though, responses from three in-depth interviews cannot be extrapolated to all photojournalists.

However, there is an intrinsic sense of morality found in all responses which permit me to think about why prevailing ways of seeing more often than not imply a power relationship exerted through dramatic representations, giving rise to concerns over visual exploitation and the possible opportunity for voyeurism. Although C. Sim and F. Wang clarified their honourable motivations in attempting to highlight migrant workers' positive humanistic traits, this is unclear in the visual analysis.

The resultant gap therefore becomes an interpretative space that reiterates the need to critically interrogate and evaluate a photographer's true objectives. It calls us to be perceptive towards current dilemmas in the practice, rather than to make fleeting judgments about what we see, which is potentially clouded by our own biases, background and experiences.

The intrinsic sense of morality present in the genre of documentary photography also prompts a bold proposal to be discerning towards the underlying goodness of image-making; it is to first believe in virtuous principles that form the foundation of the production of these images. This in turn translates into how we might better be able to perceive migrant workers represented less as objects of pity and exploitation, and more as equals deserving of respect and dignity. As images play a vital role in constructing our imagination of the world around us (Lutz, & Collins, 1993), this belief becomes a significant step in addressing social distance and discrimination in the reality of Chinese social life. As a consequence, the social value of images is demonstrated through its propensity to connect real and symbolic distance in the process of engagement. This further reifies Carey's (1989) and Silverstone's (2007) idea of how texts in society facilitate participation between people.

Images as representations of social issues in society
The combination of visual analysis and in-depth interviews go beyond appreciating Chinese migrant workers as social equals. It also reveals the untold story of underlying social problems surrounding issues of rural-urban migration, concurring with literature on how the visual can precipitate representations not immediately evident to the eye (Jewitt, & Oyama, 2001)

For example at the denotative level, *Figure 1* shows three separate individuals sitting on stools in the middle of the countryside, possibly the rural village where they are from. To the right of the frame, there is an empty chair in the foreground. The captions then indicate to us that these people are family. It identifies the man as Chen Xiaolin with his two children, and

that he also has a wife who has left home for work in the city. We understand this much from the given captions, indicating that textual interpretation still plays a vital role in giving us the first point of access towards understanding the image by contextualising it (Hall, 1997, Rose, 2007). Furthermore, I argue that text also has its merits in allowing us to move on to interpret the image at a connotative level. As a viewer looking at *Figure 1* for the first time, I am looking at strangers who are neither touching nor looking at each other, nor are they in close proximity. These are actions that typically suggest how they are related to one another based on the degree of intimacy they are engaged in. This lack of engagement hinders me from deciphering their relationship and how they come to be there in the first place.

Without texts, one can only imagine and question the context as well as the man's relationship to the children on either side of him. Conversely, *with* text, the relationship is clarified—we are looking at a family portrait. One can then move on to interpret the image as a representation of family relationships, and then move on to suggest connotations associated with it such as unity, warmth, and togetherness. Here, one is able to draw such an association because of a sharing of similar 'cultural codes', which means that individuals within this cultural sphere are able to make sense of these shared and commonly agreed upon meanings (Hall, 1997).

At the same time, one is also looking at an incomplete family. One is called to think about the absence of a mother, and this is further symbolised by the empty chair that she should be occupying. In other words, the furniture is a symbol of her absence, but also evidence of her presence. Here, the absence of a family member represents an incomplete family, thereby bringing about possible connotations of separation and difficulty. Thus far, one is able to see 'what' and interpret 'how'; but the question of 'why' they might otherwise be sitting in the middle of a field, or why furniture was used to signify 'family' still remains unanswered. Here's where speaking to the image producer would enable us to make better sense of this.

Similarly, *Figure 2* is a visual portrayal of a woman sitting alone on a bed in a bedroom. The caption grounds the image in context and informs us that she is a seamstress called Shang Lan Lan. Here, the text plays a more significant role because it not only supplements our understanding of her life's situation, it also reinforces the fact that an image is not only about what is seen, but what is unseen (Sontag, 1979). Her family is not represented in the frame, but we now know they exist precisely because the text tells us so.

Both *Figure 1* and *Figure 2* share certain similarities, although they have been shot in different situations—they are representations of family separation. In *Figure 1*, however, a

conscious effort is made to tell the story of family separation symbolised by a piece of furniture. This deliberate attempt can also be identified through the fact that one does not regularly pull out random furniture and sit in fields for photographs. The empty chair is not only symbolic of her absence, but also representative of love and the agony of being apart (J. Liu, personal communication, July 14, 2012). In recalling her interactions with Shang in *Figure 2*, C. Sim (personal communication, July 3, 2012) also discusses the difficulty of being separated from their children when migrant workers move to the city to make a living.

> *They don't see the child except once or twice a year. It's so common and one might be numb about it, but if you think about it… put yourself in their shoes, it's actually quite a difficult, almost tragic thing.*

These two images are in stark contrast to *Figure 3*, which depicts two individuals in bed. There are no captions to indicate what their relationship may be, but the degree of intimacy at least tells us that they are lovers. Against the first two images, *Figure 3* is a portrait of completeness, which in turn reinforces the emptiness and incompleteness of the families that is characteristic of the lives of migrant workers. Taking it further, such a means of representation also invites us to think about the social problems brought about by migration.

When one is sensitive to visual signs and symbols, the 'what' and the 'how' in an image can be answered. As I have rightly interpreted [and supported by the interviews], these representations deal with familiar themes of family—togetherness and separation, emptiness and fullness. By expressing their family situation in a visual manner, it also invites us to reflect on our privilege of being in touch with our families at the moment. Here there is a shared commonality that bridges distance and differences. As a result, our perception of migrant workers also begins to alter as we are better able to relate to them as an individual with stories of hardship and poverty, as well as the need for loved ones to be close.

However such a reading only grazes the surface of the issue, for it does not answer the 'why'. In-depth interviews address this, thus going a step further in explaining additional motivations and intentions. As a result, it brings to light prevailing problems in society, such as the social cost of migration. For example *Empty Chairs* is symbolic of trends in rural-urban migration. The chairs are a representation of family members who have left for the city in search of a higher salary and a better life. It further tells the story of the family's inability to move together due to high living costs in the city. As a consequence of this, children are separated from their parents, leading to feelings of animosity, alienation and regret (J. Liu, personal communication, July 14, 2012).

Similarly in *Chinese on the Train*, over 30 years of photographing migrant workers on-the-go bears witness to sweeping change across China. Trains are a representation of China's economic progress, revealing a story of how advancements in public transportation such as high-speed rail have the potential to become yet another pertinent problem in the rural-urban migration scene— with trains as one of the cheapest means of travelling across the country, future fare hikes in train travel mean that low-income earners are increasingly finding it more expensive to get home (F. Wang, personal communication, July 3, 2012; Feng, 2006).

As seen in *Empty Chairs* and *Chinese on a Train*, symbolic representations speak not only of connotations but also amplify narratives of prevailing socio-cultural issues—rural problems such as labour shortage in farms and domestic tensions, as well as high costs of urban living and travel respectively. In turn this is richly symbolic of how images themselves are a product of their 'societies and times' (Sturken, & Cartwright, 2001, p. 114). Bringing to light these problems is further made significant especially when few seem to pay attention to domestic issues in the rural sector (Wang, 2006). Instead, the literature surrounding rural-urban migration seems to focus on macro-social problems such as inequality (Sicular, Yue, Gustafsson, & Li, 2007), marginalisation and social tensions (Carrillo, 2004; Wong, Li, & Song, 2007), and inadequate provision of proper housing, education and healthcare services (Shen, & Huang, 2003; Zhang, 2002).

Furthermore, the gap in reading representations is once again evident through how these connotations interweave the reality of underlying social issues into its representations. Although it yet again identifies an imaginative space that can have varied interpretations, here, it also underpins its power to express meanings that go beyond visual representations of migrant workers.

Images as representations of complex social relationships
There is little evidence of the intention to make political statements out of these photographs, as is typical of documentary photography (Tagg, 1988). In fact, as J. Liu puts it—*My aim is to document. I don't think much about what reactions will be generated or where this work would end up*—suggesting that beginning a social project is ultimately not for the purpose of challenging political decisions or policy issues. All respondents did not envision their projects to travel far and wide, neither were they expecting an active civic response from the dissemination of their work. However, they were consciously aware of the positive outcomes that could emerge from their work.

Ironically, digital technology and increased citizen participation on the Internet have enabled these projects to circulate virally (Möller, 2010). In addition, the fairly permanent quality of digital photo essays means that both the images and the sense of social consciousness in the community can be passed on through online social networks.

For example, *China's Rat Tribe* went on from *VII Magazine*, an independent photojournalism website, to a couple of Chinese websites, garnering thousands of comments in the forum pages. It was also featured in *Foreign Policy*, in a German magazine, as well as in the national broadsheet in Singapore, *The Straits Times*. It was also selected for a photo exhibition in New York. I first located *Empty Chairs* on a Chinese blog. Later, I discovered it was in fact first published by *Xinhua News*, and then virally disseminated online. Although I did not want to choose projects featured in mainstream media, the availability of *Empty Chairs* on a Chinese blog articulates how digital technology have enabled these images to go beyond a small niche and educated audience. Its viral circulation has also seen its meaning go beyond the representational control of their makers (Tyler, 1986). C. Sim (personal communication, July 3, 2012) for instance shared that 'this is not China' and 'this cannot be real' were some of the comments that were posted, revealing distinctive identities in a society highly differentiated by socio-economic backgrounds and influences.

In comparison, it was much more difficult to locate *Chinese on the Train* because these images were first created on film. That I eventually found the digitised version on the home page of an independent photo gallery after much difficulty, and was also one of the few to speak to F. Wang about it further underscores the impact of digital technology. Here, it should also be noted that even though these images were made years before the digital age, its relevance is still appropriate for today's audience as it continues to speak of societal change in the face of economic advancement.

Rife citizen participation on the Internet is evidence of an organic social process (Carey, 1989; Slater, 1995). It concurs with the literature that images are a means by which a society communicates, and shares thoughts and ideas with one another (Bourdieu, 1990a; Carey, 1989; Lister, & Wells, 2001). This shared experience also allows us to see the capacity of visual representations to bring together and connect a seemingly homogenous yet deeply divided society.

Distance and power

Gaze, distance, camera position, and height

Different gazes are dynamic sites of contestable power relations where multiple viewpoints intersect and overlap one another (Lutz, & Collins, 1993). In both *Figure 1* and *2*, a direct gaze first confronts the photographer, establishing a moment of power and intimacy there and then (Newton, 1998). This relationship is then extended to the viewer when the gaze then confronts him. Although Tagg (1988) suggests that the direct gaze eliminates barriers to intimacy and communication, it is unclear if this communication is reciprocated, for the subject matter is still "subjected to an unreturnable gaze, in no position to speak" (Lutz, & Collins, 1993, p. 198). Evidence of this power relationship is also seen in *Figure 3*: The couple is not returning the gaze but looking at each other within the frame. Here, the viewer's visual experience is enhanced by putting him in a position of power; he is invited to observe the couple for as long as he wants without being seen, unconfronted and unknown to the subject matter (Berger, 1972; Lister, & Wells, 2001).

Can there be voyeurism when our gaze is returned? Metz seems to think so, for "the return gaze does not contest the right of the viewer to look and may in fact be read as the subject's assent to being watched" (as cited in Lutz, & Collins, 1993, p. 197). Yet Lutz and Collins (1993) argue that the returned gaze does not necessarily mean a sense of power over the subject matter as it suggests his acknowledgement of the camera's presence.

Furthermore, imaginary power relationships can also be established through techniques of spatial organisation (Rose, 2007). A similar technique is used in *Figure 1* and *2* where the camera is positioned at eye level so that we come face to face with them as if we are looking at a family portrait. In *Figure 2*, we might be standing at the door looking into Shang's room from the outside, or since we do not see an imaginary door, we could be inside her room. Either way, there is a considerable distance—it is far enough to take into account her surroundings yet at the same time near enough to see her non-smiling expression, which may suggest apprehensiveness, uncertainty or nervousness. Similarly, there is some distance between Chen's family and a viewer in *Figure 1*. The people in this frame are also not smiling. Combined with the choreographed quality of the image, it then raises pertinent questions such as if they were made to sit for the photograph against their own will. *Figure 3* on the other hand is a tighter frame that enhances the extent of the focus by cropping out other luggage or surrounding passengers. At the same time, a small clutter of items on the table has also been included to give context. Showing the couple up-close may raise a sense of intimacy

between them and us, however at the same time, the top-down approach suggests dominance, giving a viewer a sense of power over them (Lister, & Wells, 2001; Rose, 2007).

Responses from the in-depth interviews however, provide insight to the thought processes and choices considered during the production process. Although the literal distance and height between the camera position and subject matter give the impression of power and privilege exerted over their subject matter, these were in fact decisions made out of artistic direction. For example, F. Wang shared that he was overcome by a moment of inspiration which led him to make *Figure 3* on the spur of the moment (personal communication, July 3, 2012). Although there is visual theft (Newton, 1998), he usually mitigates this awkwardness by explaining himself and spending time with them on the train especially when he senses a high degree of discomfort.

Migrant workers were often happy to have their photographs taken, though this only came about after prolonged engagement. Time spent with these migrant workers indicate an effort to erode any hint of social differences which might hinder relationship-building. In fact, C. Sim (personal communication, July 3, 2012) spent much time talking and gaining her subject matter's trust before politely requesting to shoot them in their own homes. She recalls that Seamstress Shang's non-smile was not an indication of disapproval or displeasure, but that she is by nature a shy person who seldom has her pictures taken. Like J. Liu and F. Wang, she also often returns to give copies of photographs she has taken, suggesting that these relationships went deeper than merely a photographer-subject matter relationship. This extended effort is also a means by which they expressed concern for their subject matter. As J. Liu (personal communication, July 14, 2012) shares, photographs of missing family members often brought tears to migrant workers, most of whom they have not seen in a long time.

The responses gathered from the in-depth interviews tell a different story, reiterating the gap between our reading of the image and the circumstances under which it was made. They are also contrary to existing literature on the photographer's gaze and practice as positions of power. To explain why the gap exists, I turn to Jenks (1995) who posits that a history of art theory and dominant way of seeing has led to a common-sense and taken-for-granted attitude towards a photographic scene. Indeed, the literature reviewed is based on Anglo-American theories and concepts, reflecting a discursive way of perceiving images that have largely gone uncontested (Matheson, 2005; Morgan, 2010). When applied to documentary photography in the Asian context, these hidden power inequalities do not seem to be

relevant. In fact, photojournalists view themselves more as equals working with migrant workers to reach an achievable goal.

Although it brings about the question if these ways of seeing should be altered or abandoned in a different cultural context, it may instead be useful to first read visual meaning through the lens of photojournalist and then consider alternative perspectives in seeing. At the same time, I also posit that this gap is in fact a reminder that seemingly universal ways of seeing can only serve as a guide to visual reading. These are also moments of contention that call for a need to interrogate beyond existing perceptions of distance and power.

Access and permission

Being ethnically and culturally similar proved to be a strong advantage as it helps facilitate interactions through a common language. J. Liu (personal communication, July 14, 2012) for instance, experienced little resistance; in fact, speaking the language gave him easy access to villagers, though the difficulty lay in trying to communicate the significance of the chairs. Similarly, C. Sim (personal communication, July 3, 2012) recalls that looking alike made it much easier for her to gain access to the basement homes as compared to her western counterparts. However, she did experience some difficulties in acquiring these shots—most basement operators viewed her with suspicion, some slammed their doors in her face, while others required some persuasion. F. Wang's identity as a fellow Chinese travelling on the same journey gave him access to his subjects, and he was often able to get away with small talk whenever he encountered his subject matter's displeasure (personal communication, July 3, 2012). Unlike C. Sim, his Chinese nationality and upbringing bridge an aspect of cultural distance with his subject matter. Yet despite this, these incidences of resistance nonetheless demonstrate a degree of symbolic distance—they are 'not one of them'.

Although photojournalists are more well-endowed in the form of cultural capital (Hesmondhalgh, 2006), there is little evidence that they abuse this symbolic power or privilege. Rather than dictating that their subject matter listen to their artistic direction, they ensured that migrant workers fully understood and agreed to their objectives even if it meant investing long hours. The means by which they try to gain access also demonstrates a sincere desire to bridge distance and differences.

These interactions are significant as it demonstrates a listening ear, allowing migrant workers to tell their own stories and to negotiate for themselves, instead of taking the liberty to speak for them. This exemplifies Spivak's (1988) and Silverstone's (2007) vision of providing a participative space for the Other to have their voices heard. Photojournalists do not merely

photograph, they represent people and their stories. Ultimately, the choices they make point to a fundamental moral responsibility they take upon themselves as stewards of representational power.

Ambivalences, tensions, and contestations in practice

Photojournalists' position within fields of intersecting social and cultural spaces means that they continue to struggle with different power relationships to create representational meaning (Bourdieu, 1983). Although these projects were born out of an independent interest in low-income Chinese migrant workers, they nonetheless constantly struggle between their own representational styles that do not conform to a 'dominant cultural order' (Hall, 1980, p. 134), and encoding meaning in conventional ways so that an audience can make sense of it (Lister, & Wells, 2001; Rose, 2007). These tensions exemplify the existence of discursive sites of power and the difficulty of breaking out of it.

C. Sim (personal communication, July 3, 2012) chooses to focus on migrant workers, deliberately including moments that represent their humanity. As a consequence, it challenges contemporary understandings of Chinese migrant workers in real life, as evident from responses of disbelief generated from the online community. In *Empty Chairs*, only images that do not display an excessive show of emotions are selected for the final edit because J. Liu (personal communication, July 14, 2012) believes that an over-emotional subject matter would take attention away from the issue. Portraying the rural scenery was vital in contrasting a villager's dilemmas in rural-urban migration, as he puts it:

> *I wanted to visualise these social problems and draw more attention to them; it's not just about the people but the whole feel of the issue.*

Genres of street and documentary photography are also blurred in *Chinese on the Train*: Not asking for prior permission is reminiscent of street photography, though F. Wang's real objective is to document social changes in China. As observed in *Figure 3*, such a practice violates all visual behavioural concepts of visual intrusion, visual theft and visual rape (Newton, 1998). Yet in reality, he does not like to adhere to prevailing practices of documentary photography [ie: talk to people] because it takes away a moment of candidness that is now characteristic of his work (personal communication, July 3, 2012).

The analysis reveals signs of resistance seen in the way photojournalists deliberately conceive fresh perspectives in telling untold stories of migrant workers' struggle. Secondly, signs of resilience are also identified through how they accept difficult moments and deal with

negative feedback. These dilemmas complement the social value of documentary photography [as indicated in the first section]. Put together, it shows how the power to represent lies not only in the visual itself, but also in the motivations and intentions behind the lens. Ultimately it reminds us that intrinsically virtuous principles are a vital foundation in determining how migrant workers can be represented responsibly in the media.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study has been to gain insight to representations of low-income Chinese migrant workers in the genre of documentary photography. It has investigated the motivations and intentions of image producers, and has attempted to identify gaps between producers' intent and visual representation. Although these interviews cannot speak for all documentary photographers working in Asia, findings from the analysis reveal the potential of representation to go beyond speaking for the Other. It has also pointed out challenges in current practices of reading images, as well as new insights to addressing them.

There is still a lot of room for exploring Asian representations in documentary photography as it is still a relatively young concept in China where these images were being taken (C. Sim, personal communication, July 3, 2012; W. Wang, personal communication, May 20, 2012). As observed by C. Sim (personal communication, July 3, 2012), few understand its purpose, pointing to the potential for the practice to develop in the region. Its social and cultural purpose will also continue to be relevant especially in a time of rife citizen participation on the Internet (Moller, 2010). At the same time, as much of the literature reviewed are from Anglo-American culture and then applied to Asia, it also suggests a need to concurrently reconsider a new imaginative space or establish an Asian perspective in seeing the Asian world.

Finally, the study can be taken forward by critically examining how a photographer's self-identity impact a photographer-subject matter relationship. As this study has indicated, photojournalists' 'Chineseness' helped achieve their goals to some extent; yet, it might also be worthwhile to explore how their interactions with migrant workers have an impact on their own personal and professional identities. Ultimately, by knowing oneself, one is thus in a better position to understand the Other when he comes into contact with them (Mohanty, 2000). This would better enrich the dilemma of understanding cultures that are separate yet intersecting and overlapping in some areas.

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