POLITICISING DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

REN JIAN AND GUAN XIAO-RONG IN LATE 1980S TAIWAN

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Abstract

This essay provides a contextualised account of social documentary photography in Taiwan during the second half of the 1980s and a critical review of *Ren Jian* magazine within a case study of Guan Xiao-rong's *Dignity and Humiliation*. The latter emerges as an exemplary documentary work on the socio-political issues of an ethnic group of indigenous Taiwanese. The essay suggests that Guan's mixed position of documentary photographer and campaign activist made his photographs a distinctive and rare humanistic contribution with a politicised dimension.

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This essay delineates some of the major practices of social documentary photography in Taiwan during the mid to late 1980s, with a critical appraisal of the most representative magazine, *Ren Jian*, and a case study of significant work by Guan Xiao-rong. With rapid economic growth and a burgeoning democratisation movement in Taiwan during the 1980s, individual as well as collective documentary practices surged. Quick-paced economic advancement provided the material base for such practices, and the public's thirst for socio-political information propelled a collective effort of realist documentary. Its witnessing power disclosed a reality long hidden by the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, or KMT), the authoritarian regime at that time.

The most productive period of Taiwanese documentary photography occurred between 1985 and 1989, when the most representative works of its era were produced or published, particularly in the renowned magazine, *Ren Jian* (The Human World). Those five years were also a critical time for Taiwan's democratisation. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the first opposition party in Taiwan, was established in 1986,[1] a forty-year enforcement of martial law ended in 1987, and a ban on visits to mainland China was partially lifted in 1988, after a separation of four decades of Chinese people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. This historical moment was the catalyst for major changes in the social dynamics in Taiwan, as well as for a number of political rights campaigns. As these changes were occurring, Taiwan began to be drawn into the globalised international capitalist system, which brought drastic social and cultural transformations to the island. This essay is contextualised within this specific historical conjuncture, and provides the perspective for depicting and reading the social documentary works of the time.

This essay consists of three sections. The first section illustrates briefly the general scene of social documentary practices in Taiwan in the 1980s within a political setting seen through photojournalistic practice as a backdrop. The second section offers a closer look at *Ren Jian* magazine, the most influential site for social documentary photography of the time and provides a critical account of its significance and problems. The last section consists of a detailed examination of Guan Xiao-rong's work, *Dignity and Humiliation*, which was published in *Ren Jian* in parts and is considered one of the most important documentary works of the 1980s in Taiwan, or, indeed, in the history of Taiwanese documentary photography. I will argue that Guan problematises and politicises rather than exploits by aestheticising indigenous subject matter in his outstanding photographic project, which has made it politically significant in the landscape of Taiwanese documentary culture in the 1980s.

Documentary Photography in Taiwan during the 1980s: An Overview

Individual work in social documentary photography had occurred sporadically since the mid-1970s. That was the decade of a rudimentary awakening of social consciousness for Taiwanese society, while it still remained a largely close-circuited political or cultural ecology without much movement of information or opportunity. In the late 1970s, however, a "Nativist (Xiangtu) Literature Movement" took place in Taiwan, which significantly influenced not only the practice of literature but also of other art forms, especially social documentary photography. This cultural

event was ignited in August, 1977 by a series of debates in the literary supplement sections of the island's two major newspapers, where a group of left-wing writers advocated realist literature to reflect the social reality and the lives of people in society's underclass (Yu 1980).

A number of photographers took to the realist approach in their practice of "concerned" documentary photography in the first half of the 1980s. They had been encouraged by the Nativist Literature Movement, as well as a by a political breakthrough which had resulted from a series of street demonstrations by political dissidents towards the end of the 1970s. These documentary photographers preferred to employ black-and-white images, modelled after classic examples from the West, such as work of Eugene Smith. They often subjected a selected community, or environment with certain social/cultural concerns, to a lengthy visual documentation. Solo exhibitions and/or publications of monographs were the major channels for presenting their photographs. Among the best-known works between 1980 and 1985 are *Lanyu, Goodbye* by Wang Xin, *Hope and Struggle in Those 2%: A Series of Reports from the Urban Amis People in Bachimen* by Guan Xiao-rong, and *Beipu* and *Bachimen* by Ruan Yi-zhong.

Ren Jian (henceforth *RJ*), the first monthly magazine for reportage and social documentary photography in Taiwan, launched its premier issue in November, 1985. Its publisher was Chen Yin-zhen, a pre-eminent cultural and literary figure in Taiwan, and a Marxist who single-handedly founded and sustained the magazine.[2] With moral support, financial donations, and unreserved recommendations from the local cultural circle, in which Chen had a long-standing reputation, *RJ* recruited a small but dedicated staff. This young team of documentary photographers and writers shared a coherent and homogeneous work ethic and abided by the publisher's ideological and moral program.

The publisher's notes in the first issue of *RJ* addressed the magazine's aim; it was "to discover, record, witness, report and comment with photographs and text" (*RJ* 1, 1985). The advent of *RJ* provided abundant space and immense encouragement to photographers interested in producing social documentary work. Consequently, the magazine quickly became the most important place for such practices to converge. Major documentary photographers, such as Zhang Zhao-tang, Guan Xiao-rong and Ruan Yi-zhong, had their works published frequently in *RJ*. In addition, Wang Xin, notably the first female professional in this field since the 1970s and one of several pioneering social documentary photographers in Taiwan, was invited to be the first picture editor for the magazine. Taking clearly the people's stand and a critical perspective towards social/cultural issues or government policies, *RJ* gained the reputation of being the most visible social conscience of Taiwan during that time.

Apart from *RJ*'s social documentary photography, the political breakthrough in the publication of news photography in 1986 was also seen as a landmark in the contemporary history of photojournalistic development, which, in turn, encouraged the democratisation movement in Taiwan (Chen and Zhu 1987). The only newspaper taking a pro-opposition movement stand in the 1980s was the *Independent Evening News*. The islanders' political perspectives were constantly advocated, and challenges to the KMT's taboos were encouraged by the editorial board.[3] On 2 December 1986, the Chiang Kai-shek International Airport incident occurred when the KMT military police force stopped Xu Xin-liang, a famous po-

litical dissident in exile, from disembarking from a flight coming from the United States. DPP members and a large crowd of DPP supporters gathered at the airport to welcome Xu on his arrival, when a bloody confrontation erupted, caused by the abuse of the police force. The *Independent Evening News* was the only newspaper which dared publishing full-page stories and photographs of the scenes of police brutality against dozens of unarmed people.

This exclusive and unprecedented report on KMT state violence had a significant aftermath. It had not only a decisive influence on the election result for seats of the Legislative Yuan (Chen and Zhu 1987), but also raised the popular reputation of the *Independent Evening News*. At the same time, the use of news photographs to reveal the truth of a political event, absolutely prohibited before this incident, became a symbolic and actual breakthrough for the press. From then on, photojournalism took a much bolder leap forward, which helped accelerate the pace of the democratisation movement in the late 1980s (Liu 1995).

Ren Jian: An Influential but Problematic Publication

RJ magazine appeared to be the most influential publication and an important place for social documentary photography in the second half of the 1980s, which had brought such photographic practice to an unprecedented level in Taiwanese society. *RJ* published 47 issues from 1985 to 1989. For a renowned monthly publication with an average of 12 in-depth reports per issue, most of them internally produced, the size of its team was incredibly small: there were normally four to five staff photographers and two to three reporters, sometimes even fewer.[4] Chen Yin-zhen, the novelist-turned publisher, made every decision for the magazine: setting agendas and directions for *RJ* by editing (sometimes entirely rewriting) stories, selecting the cover photograph for each issue, writing blurbs for *RJ*'s publicity pages, or checking the financial balance sheet of the publication.[5]

A total of 583 stories and reports, pertaining to over 40 different categories of subject matter, appeared in its 47 issues. Despite the appearance of a wide variety of concerns featured in the magazine, only a limited number of themes received frequent coverage. In descending order of frequency, these categories and the number of stories in each one of them were: environmental issues, 96; social issues, 56; culture-related issues, 45; human-interest stories, 43; and China-Taiwan relations, 41.[6] Together, these five categories accounted for nearly half of the total reports published in *RJ*.

Different factors account for the frequency of these categories. For one, the allocation and frequency of reporting certain issues partially reflected the urgent concerns of the Taiwanese society in the second half of the 1980s, such as environmental protection from industrial pollution and faulty government policies, drastic social change, the preservation of cultural heritage sites, and the anxieties caused by policy changes in Taiwan's relations with China. However, some of these categories were more indicative of the publisher's personal preferences than of their actual pertinence or newsworthiness. For instance, reports on China-Taiwan relations were one of the publisher's major concerns, and he intended to advocate a specific stance on this issue.

The coverage was an uneven, partial reflection of the urgent or developing issues during that period of time in Taiwanese society. For instance, there were drastic political changes and various social campaigns for democratising society during

those years, but they were by and large absent from *RJ*'s coverage. Among merely 15 reports on political issues many only served to clarify or reassess historical events of an earlier era. Another example is *RJ*'s striking paucity of covering gender-related issues with only five stories over four years. Although Taiwanese society had not yet fully developed its consciousness of gender-related issues in the 1980s, it was, nevertheless, emerging and to quickly become a major social and cultural issue in the 1990s. The almost entire absence of these issues in *RJ* reflects its lack of sensitivity and, consequently, its intrinsic patriarchal characteristics.

Most of the *RJ* stories featured black-and-white photographs, accompanied by lengthy texts. Photographs occupied the majority of the space in the magazine's layouts. In fact, the proportion of photography to text was roughly 2 to 1, and in many cases pictures took even more space. But unlike photographs in magazines like *Life* or *National Geographic*, where many photographic texts have relatively autonomous functions or positions, the direction of photographic messages in *RJ* was more or less subordinate to, or dictated by text produced or predetermined by reporters or by the chief editor. Documentary photographs in *RJ* served generally as on-location evidence to show that what had been written really happened.

However, a few *RJ* staff photographers were encouraged, and expected by the publisher, to write reports to go along with their own photographs, for reasons of improving cost-effectiveness and, in the words of the publisher, for deepening the photographers' understanding and ability to organise thoughts. Photographers, consequently, committed themselves, or were assigned to do in-depth investigation, although they often have preconceptions about a subject. Photographers and writers, therefore, constantly searched for marginalised people—the "definite" victims living in the under-strata of an unjust society—and covered their stories by connecting them as much as possible to political, social or institutional injustice and inequality.

These examples were not just the typical reporting style of RJ, but, more importantly, the frequent approaches that became a trademark of the magazine's use of documentary photography: humanistic, moralistic, dogmatic and accusatory. The accusatory tone in the related photographic work was usually expressed through images of miserable looks or handicapped bodies, victimised for various reasons, as one would find in some of the FSA photographs from 1930s rural America. Or, one could find photographs of witnesses pointing their fingers in a certain direction on a particular site of a man-made mishap to accuse someone or something. Moralistic and humanistic approaches saturated every aspect of *RJ*'s photographs; it was even worse in the magazine's written reports.

Nevertheless, letters to the editor in every *RJ* issue and recommendations by renowned cultural figures on *RJ*'s publicity pages, offer generous praise and encouragement from the reading public, based on its compassion, idealism, courage, and persistence in pursuit of social justice. There may have been some glorified and unsubstantiated rhetoric, but none of the harsh realities in *RJ*'s documentary reports were fictionalised; the events, situations and sufferings really existed. The miseries exposed were actually lived by unfortunate people, and many of them are still living under such conditions. The dark side of Taiwan was consistently the main point of view for *RJ*'s documentary photography, a version of images of Taiwan rarely seen in any other print media of that time.

On the other hand, however, *RJ* credits neither reasonably represent the complex realities of that time nor justify its problematic documentary practice. The exposure of the dark side alone could not readily advance an understanding of any society. The main problem with *RJ* lies not in its tenacious focus on the dark side of Taiwanese society, but in its one-sided, dualistic, and ideologised way of engaging the dark side of Taiwan's realities. For *RJ*, the willingness to disclose it, and the romantic (or romanticised) spirit to fuel the will to do so, are regarded critical qualities of its documentary practice. Rational investigations and dialectic contemplations of more analytic or complex realities remain impossible for such engagement.

Much of *RJ*'s problematic approach to a documentary culture could be attributed to its publisher, Chen Yin-zhen.[7] He was born into a pious Christian family, whose father was a priest. His early character-forming years appeared to be of a moralistic and patriarchal nature. More importantly, Chen's exposure to Marxism and Communist Chinese history in his youth shaped, and somehow confined, his views of politics and literature. Liao Xian-hao, a literary critic, points to problems in Chen's literary works in an article appraising a conference on novels by Chinese-speaking writers: "In his later works (i.e., works since the 1980s), Chen Yin-zhen demonstrated a tendency to ontologise, totalise and romanticise the dominated class" (Liao 1994). His observation quite suitably applies to the analysis of *RJ*'s output under Chen's supervision.

In a special issue of an alternative newspaper, *Pots Weekly*, dedicated to the tenth anniversary of the founding of *RJ*,[8] Wang Muo-lin, a former *RJ* staff reporter, reassesses his work experience in the magazine self-critically.

> *Reviewing my life in Ren Jian today, I do not regret the experiences and my passionate participation in them. But, as a person already reaching his forties at that time, I didn't even understand the complexity of our society; I didn't' know it was not the society that could be split by the notions of capitalism/ socialism, or justice/injustice. Re-reading those articles [I had written then], I feel flustered.… There were so many dogmatic, prepossessed ideologies, and hollow social views without any material or empirical base.… Looking back, the only thing to be certain of is my sincerity in the work. All the other things would need to be questioned* (Pots No.16, 1995, 24).

He ends the interview by saying that by deconstructing the myth of *RJ* as the representation of social justice, he actually deconstructed himself. Wang regarded this self-criticism necessary to continue to explore the realities of this society.[9]

In retrospect, *RJ* magazine did have its historical place in the cultural climate of Taiwan during the late 1980s, which cannot be underestimated. *RJ* appeared in an age, when commercial society and consumer culture had already come to dominate Taiwan. Many people in cultural circles worried and predicted, therefore, that the magazine could hardly be sustained for more than a year.[10] Hence, the publication's tough perseverance for four years, without any external financial support or subsidy, somewhat reflects the social and cultural landscape of Taiwan at that time.

Politicising Indigenous Issues: Guan's *Dignity and Humiliation*

Guan Xiao-rong is arguably the most prominent social documentary photographer in the 1980s, whose major works were published in *RJ* magazine, and his undertaking in documentary photography is exemplary in Taiwan. Guan's two major projects on indigenous issues in this decade and his way of working on these projects, have become paradigmatic. As a photographer of the dominant ethnic group in Taiwan, the Han Ren, or Han people,[11] Guan points his camera at the most vulnerable minority of Taiwan, the Yami people of Lanyu.[12] Working differently than most Han photographers, whose work on the indigenous subjects is exploitative to various degrees, Guan investigates, analyses, and politicises an extensive range of issues of the Yami people and structural problems of indigenous societies. He directs reader attention to the Han people and their government, which are largely responsible for the miseries and humiliations of the Yami.

Few photographers in Taiwan had the same determination and perseverance to devote time and energy to documentary projects as Guan does in both of his works. For the first project, *Hope and Struggle in Those 2%: a series report from the urban Amis people in Bachimen*, he moved to the urban, indigenous fishermen's settlement in Bachimen village to live with these people for eight months during 1984-85, to observe and to document their existence.[13] Likewise in 1987 at Lanyu for the second project, *Dignity and Humiliation: a marginalised territory in Lanyu* (henceforth *DH*). In both places, Guan became part of the community and making good friends with his neighbours, who became major figures in his documentary reports. Mutual trust and a sense of togetherness between Guan and the aboriginal villagers were built by his participation not just in drinking and chatting sessions with native people, or by sharing their sorrows and difficulties, but also by initiating and organising political campaigns aimed at changing their fate.[14]

Guan never produced photographic exhibitions in galleries from these two documentary projects, nor finely printed monographs, until publishers offered proposals years after his work was completed. Guan is concerned in his work with the depth of political questions and perspectives. In the Postscript of *DH*, Guan addresses some of the self-reflexive remarks on his project.

> *After the reportage of Hope and Struggle in Those 2%, I realised that it was merely a step in a preliminary exploration of the realities (stemming) from the historical conflicts between the Han people and the indigenous peoples in Taiwanese society. Due to my personal limitations, it was at most a simple expression of humanistic emotionalism. Such an emotion might serve as an important inner drive for my investigation of indigenous issues, but that was not enough to incisively analyse the fundamental social structures that have resulted in the miseries of the Taiwanese aborigines in recent centuries, or to understand the exclusion, slaughter, occupancy, deprival and assimilation of the minority groups by the dominant race in the history of their confrontation and competition … From Bachimen to Lanyu, I intend to break through the confinement of that simple humanist emotionalism, by looking at the history of racial oppression in Taiwan. I want to search for the questions through politico-economic and sociological analysis, in order to subvert the position*

and views of the rulers of various eras, and explore a proper perspective and vision for that oppression (Guan 1994, 183, 186).

DH is published in three volumes, which include nine photographic essays and eleven reports. They contain a wide range of topics: the faulty housing policy of the KMT government; the re-building of a traditional house by a Yami family; the seasonal fishing ritual; the process of constructing a traditional Yami fishing boat, and the ritual of its launch; the diasporic Yami factory workers on the main island of Taiwan (Picture 1);[15] the lack of modern medical services in Lanyu (Picture 2); the compulsory and exclusive educational system of the Han culture (Picture 3); the exploitation and control of Lanyu's local markets by Taiwan's businesspeople; the stupidity and rudeness of tourists (Picture 4); the arrogance of a Yami culture specialist from Taiwan; the movement of resisting a KMT government policy to choose Lanyu as the storage site for nuclear waste (Picture 5), and so on.

In these reports Guan provides clear historical accounts and critical investigations of the structural elements regarding the ordeal and despair of the Yami people. He notes that the Japanese colonisers blockaded Lanyu, preventing contact with other civilisations outside the island, and preserving by force its primitive conditions to maintain a monopoly of research interest in geography, biology, and anthropology. When the KMT regime took over Lanyu after 1945, it maintained the policy of segregation for two decades, but later withdrew. It opened the island to the outside world in 1967 for the development of a tourist industry. The Yami people could hardly protect themselves against the sweep of capitalism, according to Guan, when all kinds of calamities arrived on the island.[16]

The cultural traditions, rituals, and lifestyle of the Yami people were first of all seriously interrupted and damaged by faulty, frivolous housing and tourism policies, as well as by Han tourists and "Yami specialists." The KMT government tore down most of the Yami's traditional wooden houses, ignorant of their practical and cultural functions in the specific natural/cultural environment. It built 566 concrete apartment units at six settlements in Lanyu between 1966 and 1979. The narrow and impractical cement houses in the "new communities" stifled the freedom of the Yami people and their relation with space and substantially uprooted traditions and lifestyle of the Yami culture. Guan also criticised research and documentation by Xu Yin-zhou, a Yami specialist, recommended by the Cultural Council of the KMT government, who came to record the ritual of rebuilding a traditional house. According to some more alert young natives, Guan notes, Xu had been despoiling Yami crafts and artefacts for a long time; he also asked old Yami people to strip and pose nude for his camera in an extremely offensive manner.

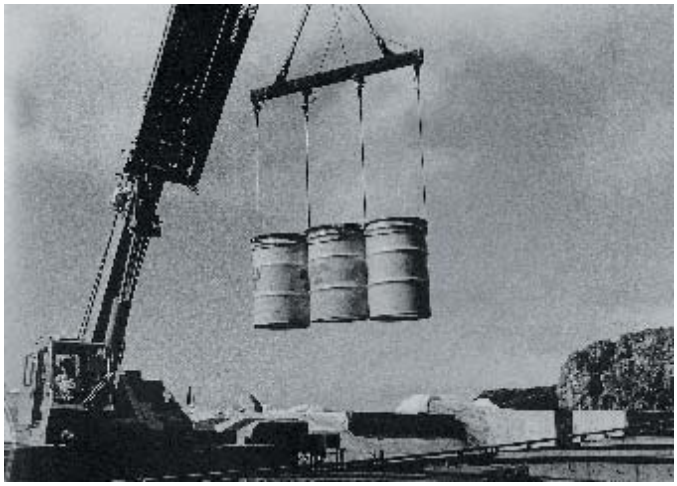
Furthermore, Guan accuses Han tourists of outrageous behaviour toward the natives, based on their self-centered ignorance, prejudice, and sense of superiority. The Han tourists from Taiwan arbitrarily trespassed in local homes to satisfy their curiosity and snatched pictures, as if they were visiting a zoo (Pictures 6 and 7). But Guan does more than witness and accuse in *DH*. He offers detailed accounts and analysis of the larger crimes of coercive economic, social, and political KMT schemes by state capitalism, which displaced and collapsed the traditional Yami economy. These "criminal" policies and schemes helped accelerate the disintegration of the Yami culture and value system and are mainly responsible for the migration of younger Yami generations to work in the lowest positions of Taiwan's labour market.

Picture 1:
Diasporic Young Yami Workers in a Taiwanese Factory

Picture 2:
The Only Ambulance in Lanyu in Shabby Condition

Picture 3:
Two Yami Schoolgirls Ready to Raise Taiwan's National Flag at an Elementary School in Lanyu that Conducts Education with Han People's Language and Culture

Picture 4:
Tourists and Photographers from Taiwan Taking Pictures of a Yami Fisherman Posing in a Canoe in a School Yard

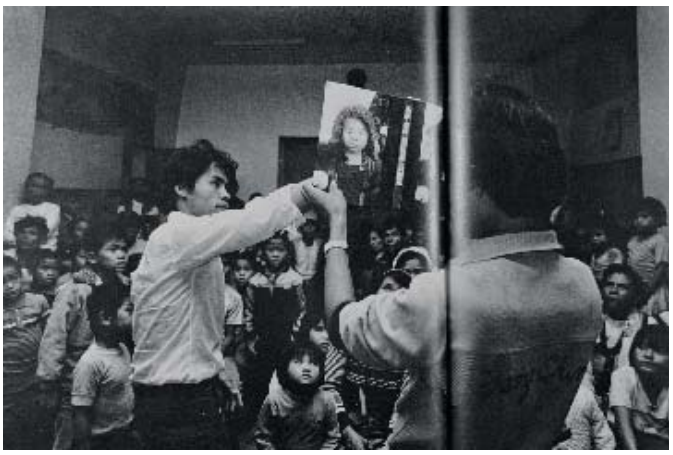


Picture 5:
Unloading Nuclear Waste Barrels at a Storage Site in Langyu

Picture 6:
Taiwanese Tourists Gazing at an Old Yami Woman on the Floor

Picture 7: Tourists from Taiwan "Sightseeing" Yami people's Daily Life

Picture 8: Young Yami Activists in an Anti-nuclear Waste Campaign Showing Pictures of Japanese Victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki Atomic Bombings to Local Children and Adults



Picture 9: An Anti-nuclear Waste Demonstration in Lanyu

While Lanyu exported its youths to be cheap labourers in Taiwan, it was also forced to import long-serving prisoners and nuclear waste from Taiwan. The prisoners were loosely guarded on the island, jeopardising social stability and making Lanyu a large "prison" for its residents. As for scandalously forcing Lanyu to be a storage site of the nuclear waste, the Taiwanese government never discussed the scheme with Yami residents and did not acquire their agreement. Guan, in making his report, "How Many 'State Secrets' Can Lanyu Bury" (Pictures 8 and 9), became personally involved in the anti-waste campaign, which had been initiated by several educated young Yami activists. Although the campaign did not succeed in stopping the government from building the storage site and shipping tens of thousands of waste barrels from Taiwan, the movement had far-reaching effects. It raised the collective consciousness of the Yami people and forced the government later to commit to a timetable for removing the waste from Lanyu to a more remote and uninhabited island.

On all politicised issues and comments in *DH*, Guan—as a Han member, an outsider, and a documentary photographer—had taken up a special position of critical partiality and mixed roles allowing for constant dialectic shifts. He stayed on this remote island for a year as a close comrade of Yami people, while poignantly interrogating the devastating environmental, social, and cultural policies of the Han government. As a documentary photographer, he sometimes stands on the side of the Yami people as a participant or an inspirer of a political campaign, before quickly shifting into his role as documentary photographer.

In his preface to *DH*, "Cold Blood in a Warm Heart" (Guan 1994), the journalist Yang Du gives a vivid account of observing Guan's shifting position during one of the anti-nuclear waste campaigns. Yang, a former colleague and friend, brought Guan some necessary items from Taiwan for the Lanyu campaign, including a portable speaker, large sheets of paper and cloth for making posters, a projector, and slides of the radiation casualties after the Chernobyl incident in Russia.

Yang describes the urgent situation at that time. The government-owned Taiwan Electric Power Company had arranged for several Yami delegates to go on a complimentary trip to Japan and visit nuclear power stations, to observe their handling of nuclear waste. Guan organised a protest session for the anxious young men, who had tried to halt this trip unsuccessfully.[17] Aside from a regular documentary report, Guan also tried to raise anti-nuclear consciousness among the young natives. After realising that the trip was a bribe,[18] they decided to accept Guan's suggestion of demonstrating at the Lanyu airport—an action that had never occurred before in the history of the Yami people. Yang recalls:

> *When Xiao-rong and I arrived at the airport, we gave the posters and sheets [of protest messages] to these Yami young men. As he [Guan] took his camera from the bag and stood calmly aside, his role changed immediately to one of reporter, as if he was some strange "outsider" … Guan Xiao-rong the reporter suddenly looked so vastly different from the Guan, who wrote the poster messages with excitement at an earlier moment: he did not say a word or greet his Yami friends; he just photographed expressionlessly, documenting quietly the very first demonstration ever in the history of Yami people, like a cold-blooded observer.*

> *We knew precisely that we were standing on the "outside" of this: no one could help another nation, unless the people in that nation want to stand up by themselves first. Indeed, the re-building of subjectivity is still up to the nation itself; the outsider has to remain in his role only as a helper in the end* (Yang in Guan 1994, 8-10).

Guan, in *DH*, is at once a documentary photographer and a participant. As the former, Guan's critical distance in *DH* is obtained by his calm observation and analysis of the predicament of the Yami people, which appears in several places in the reports. However, he does not dichotomise and simplify the morality between Han intruders and Yami victims, or sanctify Yami culture and lifestyle. For example, Guan points to the problems of his Yami friends in his closing remarks of "Lanyu under the Violence of Tourism," after reporting about the behaviour of tourists and the exploitative policy of tourism. Seeing how Yami youths reacted against the tourist offensive by cursing them, kicking them away, or smashing their cameras, Guan comments that "though [the counteractions] provide temporary satisfaction, this individual, sporadic resistance could hardly change the political economic structure behind tourism, and, therefore, would prove to be only in vain. It merely internalises the severe injuries in the deep spirit of the Yami people, destroying their minds implicitly" (Guan 1994, 179).

In "The Wondering Yami Labourers in Taiwan," Guan also depicts his experience of seeing two young Yami workers in Taiwan quarrel fiercely after drinking alcohol at a party for Yami people; in another case, a group of Yami labourers fight with local Han people. He analyses the helpless dependence on alcohol among indigenous workers in their laborious lives and unstable jobs, which had increased the chances of physical disputes in their own circles or with other groups, forcing Yami labourers into periods of constant frustration and disorder.

Critiques of humanistic photography in the documentary culture are copious in Western critical writings (Sontag 1978; Berger 1980; Taylor 1998). The analysis of the predicament of young Yami people in *DH*, together with other characteristics of the project, prove that Guan's humanistic perspective in his documentary reportage actually breaks through the level of emotionalism or sentimentalism commonly observed in the practice of humanist photography in Taiwan.

There are also critical discussions of the photographic gaze of indigenous people as "the other" and of aestheticising their culture and image (Rosler 1998; Gidley 1992; Lutz and Collins 1993).[19] The anti-nuclear waste campaign and other urgent problems documented in *DH* are not to be reduced to a distant, abstract political notion to be eventually dissolved or deciphered by "beautiful" images, nor to a number of visual symbols of "the other" to be gazed upon or consumed. Guan's photographic work and his writings are real histories and lived experiences of the Yami people, who strive to confront the issues of *survival* of their lives and culture.

Guan Xiao-rong's photography in *DH* does not produce exotic gazes at marginalised people, but interrogative glares at state power and the dominant classes. His documentary work is not humanitarian or emotional, but political and radical, although humanism, compassion, and justice remain an internally sustaining element for Guan. It is hence not based on moralism and didacticism, but on critical and dialectical analysis. Furthermore, there is no heroism in *DH*: Guan does not

project a heroic look of the Yami people in his photographs by overemphasising their tragic or sanctified images, nor does he make himself a hero in the anti-nuclear waste campaign. Guan exercises great self-control, which allows him to keep flexible, while extremely self-disciplined. *DH* distinctively demonstrates a rare practice in the Taiwanese social and cultural context of the 1980s, but clearly refuses the much criticised mode of humanistic photography, exercised by many other local photographers. He works in a realist mode with his documentary photography of Lanyu, which has its inevitable limitations of speaking for complex truths. Nevertheless, with substantial analytic work and a clear political vision in his accompanying texts, Guan makes *DH* into a radical documentary of irreducible political significance for Taiwanese society. Martha Rosler (1989, 25) advocates bringing a radical documentary into existence, and Guan's *DH*, has provided an appropriate example.

Conclusion

The socio-political context of the 1980s in Taiwan and its supposed motives for a documentary practice reflect a specific situation, largely distinctive from the Western experiences in the 1930s. What existed in Taiwan during that time was not a structured class society, but one that struggled towards a democratic society by opposing the authoritarian KMT regime. Social documentary photography generally took a politically oppositional stand against the state and its control over basic freedoms of expression. For Taiwan, the documentary practice was intended as a means to awaken, agitate, or summon a collective consciousness of political opposition against the KMT government. However, although Guan Xiao-rong has offered progressive political messages in his realist pictures, the humanitarian photography of many other documentary practitioners falls short of political significance. Their problems were not merely exercises in realism without a potent visual language, but more importantly, the inability of conveying a structural understanding and analysis of the political dimension of relevant issues.

This analysis of *DH* provides a different scene of Taiwan's realist documentary experience and argues for the possibility of a radical documentary. Guan's *DH* offers a positive example, presenting progressive political perspectives in its reports, which offer a structural understanding of the social deterioration and cultural invasion of the Yami people on Lanyu by Han people until 1987. Thus, *DH* is as much a politicised documentary project as it is a rational one. The notion of "rational work" refers to the fact that the project does not intend to move the reader with emotional appeals or sentimental visual devices, but provides potent information and incisive political viewpoints on specified issues within a specific historical context. I would identify Guan Xiao-rong as a humanist photographer. However, his pursuit of realist photography and his humanistic concerns have not prevented him from engaging social documentary with political activism. *Ren Jian* leaves for Taiwan a brave but problematic legacy, while Guan Xiao-rong and his *Dignity and Humiliation* constitute a heritage that deserves greater attention.

Notes:

1. The DPP was considered an illegal organisation when it was formed in 1986, but was legalised the following year, when martial law was lifted and the forming of political parties allowed. The DPP became the ruling party in 2000.

2. Chen personally did not have any money to support a monthly publication; it was one of his younger brothers, who ran a small printing business, and who regularly provided for Chen's basic financial need running this magazine.

3. Newspapers, and all other news media, were almost all owned or at least tightly controlled by the KMT government for four decades, before the lifting of martial law in 1987. The "islanders" refers to the earlier immigrants from Fujian province of south-eastern and coastal China, who had been arriving in Taiwan since the 17th century. They comprise the majority of the population. In 1949, there were around 6 million of them, while the "Mainlanders" are immigrants who retreated with the KMT regime during the same year, and added 2 million to the population.

4. In the last eight issues of *RJ*, the number of full-time staff photographers and writers was cut back to two each, with other team members becoming freelancers, due to the magazine's financial conditions.

5. I was employed by *RJ* in the first year of its publication, and it was from first-hand experience and observation that I learned how the publisher performed his duties. I interviewed some ***RJ*** staff reporters in the later issues and confirmed Chen's consistent way of leading the team.

6. The next five categories with frequent coverage were: historical topics (35), indigenous issues (34), geographic stories (28), agricultural/fishing issues (20), and labour issues (16). The first 10 categories of frequent coverage comprised 70 per cent of all *RJ* reports.

7. Many people equated *RJ* magazine with Chen Yin-zhen, as seen in the praise and recommendations by cultural figures in *RJ* No. 29. From my observation, such an equation was not incorrect.

8. This weekly newspaper of art and culture titled its special issues *"Ren Jian:* a Decade Later," in two parts. In the issue, the publisher of *RJ,* as well as some of the magazine's chief members, were interviewed. Talks from a panel discussion with Chen Yin-zhen and different generations of cultural critics were transcribed for the series and other commentaries were organised. The results were published in *Pots Weekly,* Nos. 16 & 17, December, 1995.

9. Wang Mo-lin was one of only two people among eleven former staff members interviewed, who provided critical reflections on the *RJ* experience. The other one was Zhong Qiao, a former *RJ* staff reporter.

10. Short-story writer, Zhu Tien-wen, confessed such worries later in *RJ*, when the magazine invited famous figures from the cultural circle in its 29th issue.

11. Han Ren or Han people is a collective term for dominant ethnic groups living in the heartland of China, as opposed to "alien" races and aboriginal minorities in ancient border areas of what are currently the deep north, northwest and southwest of China.

12. Lanyu is an island southeast of Taiwan, whose main inhabitants are Yami people, who have maintained their traditional ways of life for centuries.

13. Bachimen village is not far from Taipei, where Guan Xiao-rong lived over that period of time. This means he could commute during the project instead of living for a rent in a small, scruffy room at Bachimen without modern toilet facilities. Guan had a stable and well-paying job at *China Times Weekly Magazine,* a popular publication of the China Times Corporation before the Bachimen project. He quit the job in 1984 to undertake this documentary project, because he could no longer stand the constraints regarding subject matter and the ideology of the corporate news media.

14. After Guan first published *Hope and Struggle in Those 2%* in *RJ*, living conditions in the Bachimen settlement became widely noticed and attracted attention from the relevant sectors of the government. The Amis settlers were later promised a re-settlement project and new apartments were completed in 1994. Guan's involvement in the anti-nuclear waste campaign at Lanyu in 1987 resulted in a recent government policy for a clear timetable to remove waste materials from the storage sites in Lanyu. For the former, see the preface in Guan, *Hope and Struggle in Those 2%*, 1996:10. For the latter, see news report about debates in the Legislative Yuan, *China Times*, 10 April 2002, 6.

15. All topics in *DH* are presented in a series of photographs for each report. To save space I sample only one image from each story for some of the topics.

16. All quotes and summaries of Guan's written accounts for this documentary work in this section were taken from Guan, Xiao-rong 1994.

17. According to Yang's account in his preface, Guan had never been an environmental activist or social campaign organiser. When Guan worked as a photojournalist for the news magazine before the Lanyu project, however, he had many opportunities to cover street demonstrations. He was consequently familiar with basic patterns and requirements for a demonstration.

18. The Yami delegates found it difficult to resist the temptation of the invitation to this trip, according to Yang Du; it was the first and perhaps only opportunity in their lives to travel abroad.

19. For example, Martha Rosler and Mick Gidley respectively have questioned Edward Curtis' photographic images in *The North American Indian*. See Rosler 1989, 311, and Gidley 1992, 115. Lutz and Collins (1993), also analyse the multitude of gazes on indigenous cultures in *National Geographic* photographs.

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