



Birth Year: 1905

Over 100 by Jun Wang



Published in *LensWork* and *LensWork Extended* #110

Commentary

There is so much to talk about with this photograph, I hardly know where to begin. I suppose the beginning makes the most sense, so here is some background for this entire project.

I had been invited to visit China in the southern island of Hainan. Jun Wang was one of the photographers I met there. At one point, he surreptitiously slipped me a flash drive and asked me to take a look at his project. He explained that he could not publish it in China for cultural and political reasons. People over the age of 100 are supposed to be particularly blessed because of their long life; Wang had been photographing people over 100 years old for a number of years and found them to be universally suffering. In pain, incapacitated, incapable of taking care of themselves, they all confessed to him that life was no longer pleasant. He photograph them in order to tell their actual story, not the romanticized one. We felt his project was incredibly powerful and were happy to share his work in the pages of *LensWork*, even though he would not be able to share our publication with his Chinese peers.

This particular image has, for me, a most powerful emotional content. We can't see this gentleman's eyes; we can't see any teeth — and presumably he has none; his posture and open mouth almost suggest that he has passed away, but the background and his glasses suggest he has not. He seems only half alive, caught between this world and the next. Is he sleeping? Is he imploring the heavens? We don't know,

and it is this ambiguity that makes this a powerful photograph. This ambiguity is further enhanced by the blurred background which visually disconnects him from this Earth as he appears to float above the stone blocks.

About the captions: When Jun Wang gave me his original project, each portrait included a caption with the name of the town where the individual lives. Of course, to our American and European audience such Chinese village names would be meaningless. I suggested to Wang that we replace their location of residence with their birth year and he agreed. This simple text that accompanies each of the portraits in his project reinforces the conceptual component that underlies this entire body of work. Without that text, I think the work would still be photographically good, but perhaps not as fully communicative. Sometimes the text component we need for our project is small, compact, not even a complete sentence. Realizing this can be discovered when we think critically about that underlying conceptual component — in this case, the age of the subjects — instead of becoming exclusively focused on our images and insisting they must stand alone without any caption or title.