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The Invisible, Ever-present Past: Taca Sui's *Steles/Huang Yi Project*

The photographs in Taca Sui's *Steles/Huang Yi Project* (2015) are Chinese landscape paintings without paint. They are ink rubbings without ink. Like the eighteenth-century works of Huang Yi (1744-1802) that inspired them, his photographs are elegant records of personal journeys of exploration and meditations on China's connection to the distant past. Taca Sui's work actively connects photography to traditional literati modes of expression. Appropriating formal elements from landscape painting and ink rubbing, the artist recasts these modes of expression to serve a distinctly contemporary artistic practice.

Taca Sui, *Odes of Ya and Song III—Dust*, 2012, silver gelatin print, 50 x 50 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.



- In his previous series, *Odes* (2013), Taca Sui was inspired by the first work of Chinese poetry, the *Book of Odes* (11th–7th C. BCE). Using this text as a guide, he traveled through China visiting places referenced by the poems. The completed project is compiled like a book, with each photographic vista organized according to the chapter of this poetic model. Thus, each image is paired with a specific verse, even when the original poems do not specifically reference landscape. In one sense, these works translate poetry into the medium of photography. Each evokes the restrained but poignant



nature of the artist's source material, with staid tones of black and white and careful formal composition substituting for the rigours of poetic metre. Like the ancient poetry that inspired them, the strict formal structure frames and emphasizes the emotion described within. The quiet, largely uninhabited landscapes concisely express the themes of curiosity, wonder, loneliness, loss, and beauty found in the *Book of Odes*.

Taca Sui, *Odes of Qin and Bin I—Mountain under the Sun*, 2011, silver gelatin print, 50 x 50 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.

But Taca Sui's *Odes* are more than just visual interpretations of poetry; they are personal reflections that use photography to reinterpret a classic text. The photographs are inspired by the same landscapes that inspired the poetry in the *Book of Odes*. Landscape itself thus forms a spiritual locus, linking Taca Sui's artistic project to an ancient poetic response. But while the poems and photographs are both responses to real landscapes, Taca Sui's photographs construct a tension between the elegant palaces and temples described in the *Book of Odes* and the current landscape of China, where these sites have largely disappeared. Part elegy and part exploration, Taca Sui's photographs are thus meditations on the place of the *Book of Odes* in contemporary China. Can poetry still be found in the mountains and rivers of the Chinese countryside? And what relevance do these ancient poems have for China today?

Taca Sui's search for the lost physical and emotional landscape of ancient China has been further refined and given new focus in his latest collection of photographs, *Steles: Huang Yi Project*. Like his previous series, it is a visual document of the artist's travels around China to visit places referenced in a historical text. But, unlike *Odes*, this project follows the travel diaries of a Qing dynasty scholar named Huang Yi (1744–1802), who was also looking for traces of China's cultural past in the physical landscape of eighteenth century China.

Huang Yi was born in present day Hangzhou, the seventh generation descendant of a Ming official. His father, Huang Shugu (1701–1751) lived the life of a retired scholar and never took public office. As a young man, Huang Yi studied law and was trained in hydraulic engineering. Although he successfully held posts managing waterway navigation in Henan and Shandong, his reputation as a competent civil official was overshadowed by his fame as an artist and seal carver. Trained in calligraphy, painting, and poetry composition from an early age, Huang Yi is best known for a series of paintings and ink rubbings that documented the trips he took into the Chinese countryside in search of ancient steles.¹

The search for ancient steles was an important pursuit with clear political ramifications for scholars in the early Qing dynasty. When the ethnically Han Ming dynasty was overthrown by the Manchu Qing, the new dynasty preserved elements of traditional Chinese culture and adapted them to serve their purpose. Ming state rituals and bureaucratic structures were left largely unchanged, but these institutions were made to serve the new dynastic order. For Han Chinese scholars, this created a problem of identity, as Chinese culture was bent to serve a conquest dynasty. How could Han Chinese scholars connect to Chinese history without the distorting lens of Qing rule?

For Ming loyalist scholars in the Epigraphic School (*beixue pai*), inscriptions on ancient stone steles and bronzes assumed a new importance as direct links to Chinese history that were free from Qing meddling. As part of a larger movement toward "evidential" research, these scholars searched the countryside on systematic field expeditions called *fāngbei* (visiting steles).² On these trips, scholars worked to discover, catalogue, and interpret early steles. The inscriptions on these ancient stones were used to correct written texts compiled in Qing books. This process of rewriting history to reflect a Chinese identity independent of Qing rule was a powerful if subtle act of rebellion.

In addition to their literary content, rebellious scholars also appropriated the unusual calligraphic style of ancient steles as a reflection of a distinct Han identity. Epigrams from the Northern Wei dynasty, which often include strange forms of common characters, were particularly treasured. For scholars familiar with these historical texts, the unorthodox structure and clumsy composition of these characters was a mark of authenticity absent from the carefully edited calligraphic examples available in printed model books.

Huang Yi was born one hundred years after the fall of the Ming dynasty; his interest in steles was less an act of rebellion than an attempt to connect with a history that was tragically out of reach. His *fangbei* excursions endeavoured to unearth a lost history whose physical traces surrounded him, undiscovered. Although ancient steles had long been observed and casually recorded in local gazetteers, they often sat half-buried and unnoticed in farmers' fields. Using these sketchy written records to guide him, Huang Yi searched the countryside hoping to find these early steles.³

In 1786, Huang Yi made two exciting archaeological discoveries that demonstrate his efforts to preserve the physical traces of China's past. In Shandong province, he discovered the lost mortuary stones of the Wu family. A collection of over forty pictorial stones, steles, and gate pillars, the Wu Shrine had long been celebrated as a representative example of Han mortuary art, but was lost to flooding after the Song dynasty (960–1279). Not only did Huang Yi rediscover the stones, he also led a campaign to build a structure to consolidate and protect them from weathering.⁴

That same year, Huang Yi supervised the excavation and movement of the Zheng Jixuan stele from nearby Jiaxiang County to the Jining Academy. This impressive stele was erected in 186 CE as a monument to a local magistrate. Its bold inscriptions were incised in regular, clerical, and seal script. The stele was thus an important document of local history and an excellent model for writing. Moving the stone to a prominent local school was a symbolic investiture of the distant past into the present; at the same time, it was a practical move designed to protect the fading surface of the stone from further disintegration.

Over the course of his travels, Huang Yi discovered hundreds of steles that needed preservation but could not be moved to safety. For these works, he used a process called *taben* rubbing to create accurate reproductions of the original inscriptions. Unlike a Western pencil rubbing, a *taben* is made using an exacting, labour-intensive process. After the face of a stele is cleaned with a horsehair brush, a special water-based glue is applied to its surface. Paper is applied evenly over the surface so that it clings to the stele. After the paper dries, a tight bundle of palm fiber is used to pound the paper into the incised characters. When complete, the paper clings to the inner surface of each character on the stele. Next, a fine cloth batting is soaked in ink and lightly tamped across the surface, blackening the paper along the surface of the stele but leaving the white paper stamped into the grooves of each character. After the ink dries, the paper is carefully lifted off the stone. The resulting work is a direct impression of the stone that captures each character exactly as it existed when the *taben* was made. All imperfections in the stone itself such as cracks and chips are also preserved.⁵

Thus, when protecting the original stone is impossible, a *taben* can be used to create a direct physical impression of a stele that preserves a perfect record of its inscription. The portability and stability of these paper copies facilitated the transmission of early inscriptions to a wider audience.

Although the practice of producing *taben* has a long history in China, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scholars were especially committed to this practice, travelling around the Chinese countryside to collect impressions before the original stones were lost or damaged. Ancient steles were sometimes broken apart by local farmers and utilized as building materials. Even unmolested stones were subject to the vicissitudes of weather, which could crack and erode the surface.

Ironically, the greatest threat to many of these steles was the demand for *taben* itself, as the rubbing process slowly destroys a stele even as it preserves its inscription for posterity. Repeated pounding with a bundle of palm fibers slowly wears away the crisp incisions on the stele, blurring the line between the stele's face and the incised characters. Later impressions begin to lose their clarity, the characters bleeding into each other before the entire work becomes illegible. The mechanism of preservation sometimes destroyed what scholars hoped to save.

In the eyes of Qing scholars, the most important product of Huang Yi's travels was the *taben* rubbings that he made. Freshly printed from previously untouched stones, these reproductions were visually stunning. Each text was a faithful representation of China's distant past, impervious to Qing meddling or editing. Collected together in books, Huang Yi's *taben* were a textual and artistic bridge that placed a viewer in direct contact with antiquity. As Qing intellectuals struggled with their identity, the promise of art as a mediating force between the present and past was valued above everything else.

Taca Sui, *Shicong*, 2015,
archival pigment print on
baryta paper, 53 x 80 cm.
Courtesy of the artist and
Chambers Fine Art, New York.



Taca Sui's photographs are direct inheritors of this search for identity in the physical relics of the past. However, a direct connection with antiquity is impossible to construct using Huang Yi's methods. Following Huang Yi's footsteps through the landscape of contemporary China, Taca Sui has been largely unable to find ancient steles, making documentation of these sites through the production of *taben* impossible. Even when he does find steles, their faces are worn blank from weathering and cracked with damage. These surfaces resist mechanical reproduction through rubbing, conveying layers

of obfuscatory texture but not the original inscription. With no trace of the ancient texts on their surface, contemporary impressions reproduce the static of a distant radio station without transmitting the signal. Although texture can convey a sense of weathered antiquity, it alone cannot connect a viewer to the past in the same, meaningful way as an inscription.

Taca Sui uses photography in place of *taben*, recording and connecting to the past with photographs in a manner that rubbings no longer can. A photograph, like a *taben*, is a record of time and place that attests to its creator's act of travel and discovery. But photography records the interaction of light with surface rather than a direct physical impression, allowing Taca Sui to step back from the physical objects that fascinated Huang Yi and record what remains. Surfaces and textures are folded into their surrounding context, capturing echoes of Huang Yi's scholarship and the original works they sought to record.

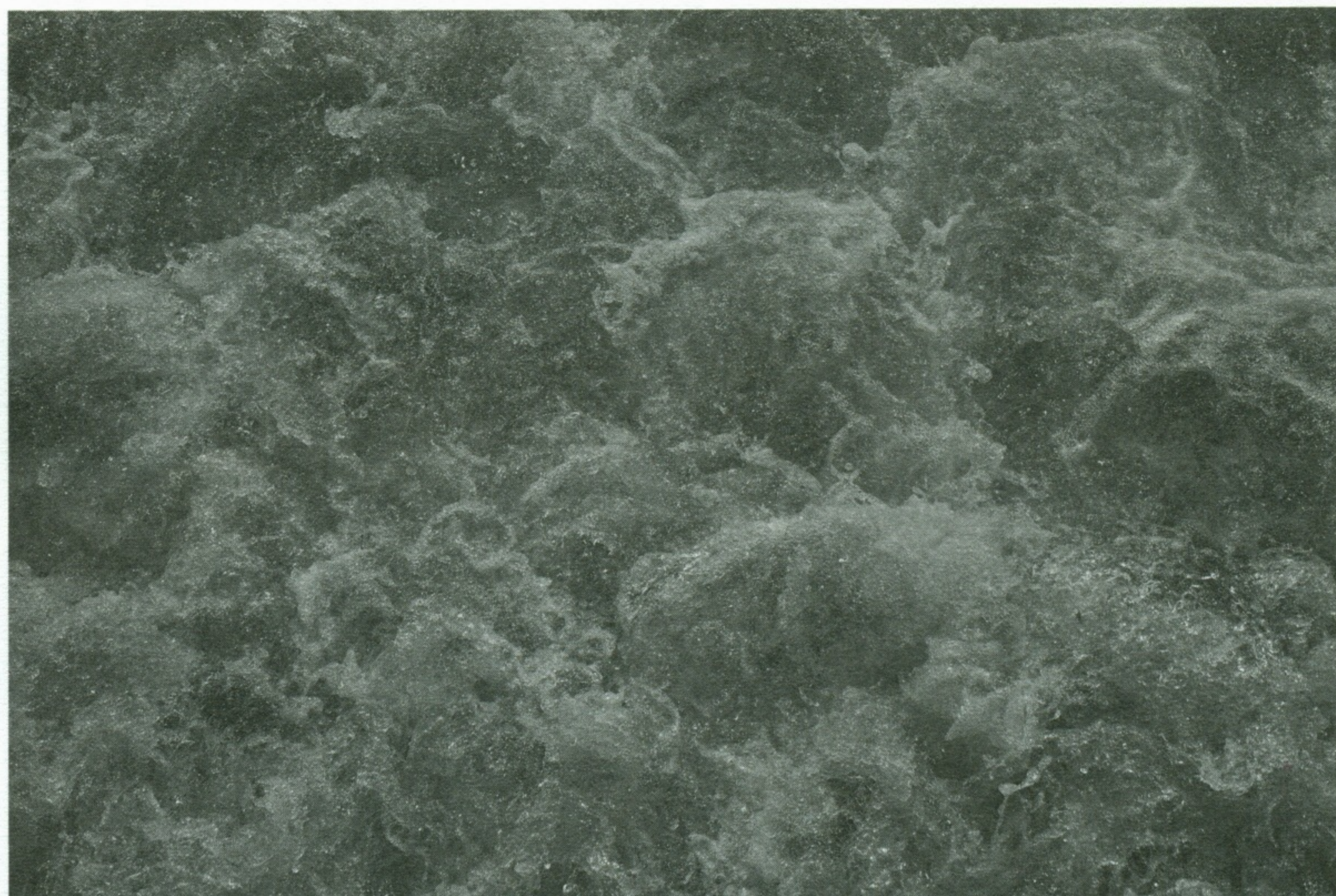


The resonance between *taben* and photography is highlighted through several visual qualities in *Steles: Huang Yi Project*. Each photograph is printed on *baryta* paper, which has a distinctive rippled surface. This effect evokes the textured surface of *taben*, which are crinkled by the act of impressing paper into the stone and the uneven drying of ink. Taca Sui's skeuomorphic adoption of this textured surface evokes the power and process of *taben*, connecting photography to traditional Chinese methods of reproduction and arguing for its power as a medium for truthful representation.

Taca Sui, *Feilai Peak*, 2015, archival pigment print on baryta paper, 53 x 80 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.

Taca Sui also uses colour and composition to evoke the visual qualities of *taben*. His use of glossy monochrome on *baryta* paper recalls the lustrous quality of fine ink rubbings, which softly reflect light in unusual ways when viewed from different angles. Sky, water, rock, and vegetation are all

Taca Sui, *Baotu Spring*, 2015, archival pigment print on baryta paper, 53 x 80 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.

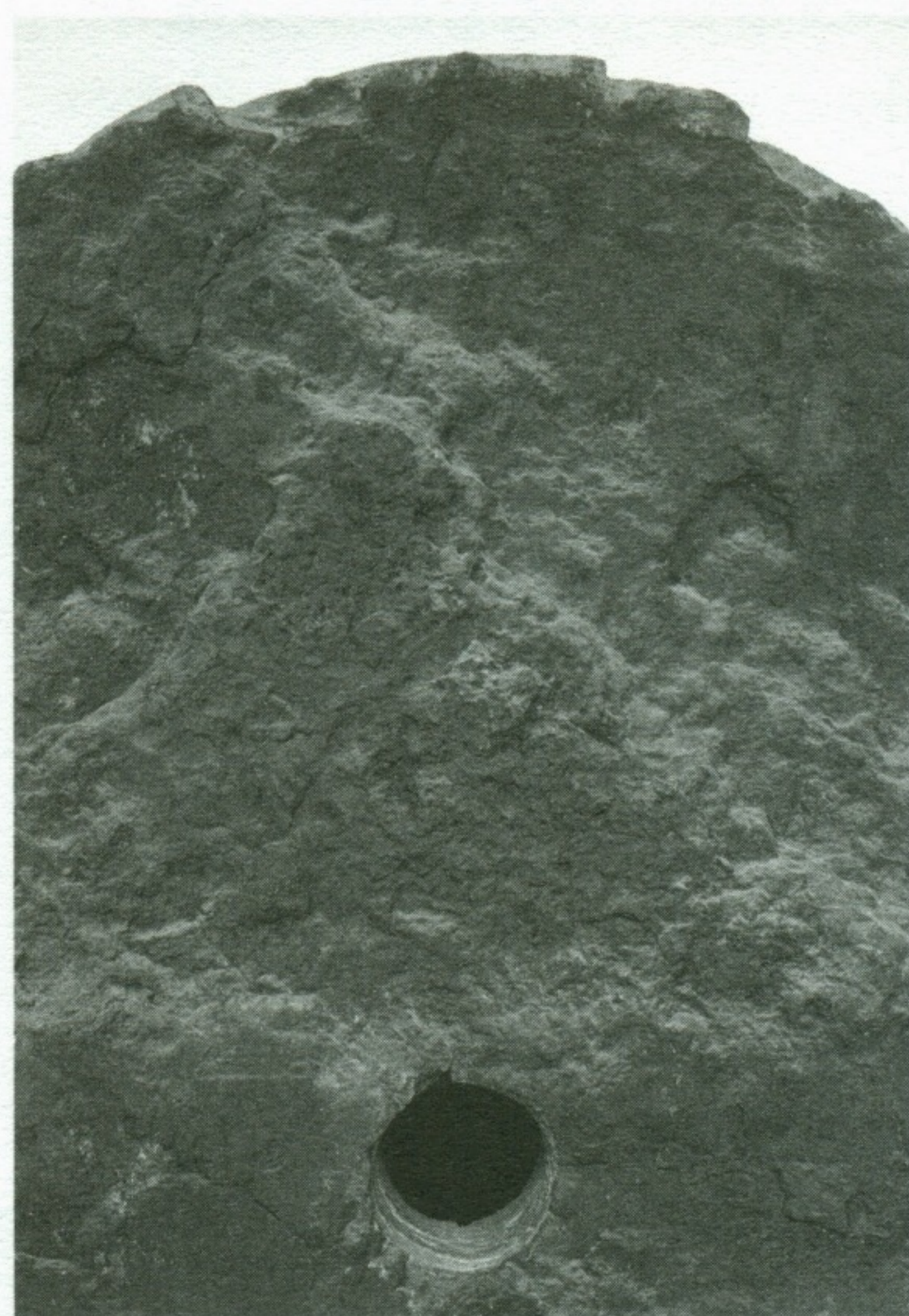


rendered in restrained shades of grey. This restricted palette collapses the depth of field and draws foreground and background together.

This visual flattening is further advanced through compositions that strip each photograph of visual elements that provide a sense of scale. Without contextualizing human figures, buildings, or natural features, each photograph initially reads as a purely abstract composition of line and texture. Only after close viewing do his works begin to resolve into three-dimensional images. Even then, a visual tension remains, and each photograph seems to hover between two-dimensional abstraction and three-dimensional representation.

Left: Taca Sui, *Stele by Zheng Jixuan*, 2015, archival pigment print on baryta paper, 80 x 53 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.

Right: Taca Sui, *Podium for Scripture Viewing*, 2015, archival pigment print on baryta paper, 80 x 53 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.



A pair of images, *Stele by Zheng Jixuan* (2015) and *Podium for Scripture Viewing* (2015), illustrate the power of this approach. Hung side-by-side, they share a formal composition despite the fact that they represent very different subjects. In both images, a dominating rectangle of dark grey occupies almost the entirety of the photograph, except for the sharply delineated arc of its upper edge. Above this edge in both photographs is a light grey patch of sky, which removes any sense of scale and flattens the

foreground image. Thus collapsed into two dimensions, the texture of both works is highlighted; craggy indentations and shadow in one rhyme with twisting, organic masses in the other. Only upon further viewing is it clear that *Stele* is a representation of a weathered stone while *Podium* represents a vista of desolate cliffside. Stele and mountain, surface and landscape are rendered on equal terms.

The elision of landscape and surface in Taca Sui's photographs is absent from Huang Yi's rubbings, whose cracked, weathered surfaces allude only obliquely to the rugged countryside where they were collected. But Huang Yi made his experience of these remote landscapes concrete through a series of painted travelogues that circulated alongside his rubbings. He created a number of painted *fangbei* albums that documented his field research between 1775 and 1793.⁶ Rendered in a restrained, monochrome style, these works imitate Song and Yuan masters through the proximal influence of Dong Qichang (1555–1636) and the Qing Orthodox school. Huang Yi's paintings are accompanied by his original written accounts of the sites he visited, which describe the steles that he found. Together with the *taben* rubbings, these works connect Huang Yi's exploration of China's physical landscape with his search for antiquity. Landscape becomes a contextualizing gateway for a direct relationship with the distant past.



Taca Sui's photographs acknowledge the role of Huang Yi's paintings in mediating an experience of landscape, epigraphy, and antiquity. Even as his photographs break down the context offered by three-dimensional space, they create additional layers of meaning by establishing stylistic connections with Huang Yi's paintings. Taca Sui freely borrows Huang Yi's formal compositions, constructing scenes that recall the hills and valleys of Huang Yi's landscapes even when they are representing different subjects. In *Daming Lake*, the photograph oscillates between a

Taca Sui, *Daming Lake*, 2015, archival pigment print on baryta paper, 80 x 53 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art, New York.

three-dimensional view of receding ripples highlighted by a ray of sunlight and a reading of these delicate, undulating forms as pure line and texture. In this, they visually rhyme with Huang Yi's painting of *Daming Lake*, which portrays the water as a vast expanse of white broken only by the sun's reflection on a band of water. In Huang Yi's painting, light grey hemp rope strokes create the illusion of ripples, and light dots simulate the effect of the sun. Taca Sui's *Daming Lake* (2015) employs a wide depth of field and soft focus that simulates these gentle ink strokes. This same gentle blur renders highlights of light as broad white dots, again recalling Huang Yi's rendering of light on water.

Huang Yi, *Buddha Valley*,
from *Investigating Steles at
Mount Dai*, 1797, ink on paper,
17.4x50.8cm. Collection of the
Palace Museum, Beijing.



Taca Sui, *Buddha Valley*,
2015, archival pigment print
on baryta paper, 53 x 80 cm.
Courtesy of the artist and
Chambers Fine Art, New York.



In *Buddha Valley* (2015), Taca Sui again borrows Huang Yi's original composition but turns it upon itself for dramatic effect. Huang Yi's painting depicts a lone monastery in a valley closely encircled by rocks, which seem to press from all directions. Two travelers climb a rocky path that emerges from the lower right corner of the painting. In his original inscription, Huang Yi describes the sensation of surprise in finding this remote monastery in these unwelcoming mountains. In Taca Sui's photograph of the same name, the three-dimensionality of Huang Yi's rendering has been abandoned. An expanse of wall replaces mountains, punctuated by a small, square recess rather than a remote valley. Instead of a monastery, a delicate bird's nest with two dun-coloured eggs forms the photograph's visual centre. The surrounding surface is stubbornly dendritic, its mottled surface recalling both bark and stone. This patination is broken only by a large crack that runs towards the lower right-hand corner of the photograph, recalling the mountain path in Huang Yi's original composition.

For both artists, *Buddha Valley* is emblematic of a larger relationship between their experience of Chinese landscape and China's imagined past. In this painting, Huang Yi's exploration of remote and inhospitable mountains was rewarded with the unexpected surprise of human activity and Chinese civilization. In the same manner, Huang Yi's *fangbei* expeditions were successful in locating physical traces of Chinese culture in areas long overlooked and often forgotten. The artist's paintings and rubbings created a direct connection with China's past. True relics of Chinese culture were waiting patiently for his arrival.

Although Taca Sui may have also approached his expeditions with the hope of finding physical traces of China's past, *Buddha Valley* is gentle proof that his discoveries were fundamentally different. No monastery and no human activity welcome the artist at the heart of Buddha Valley. Instead, the forms of nature itself have the power to delight and amaze. Texture, line, and composition shape an experience of place, creating scenes that oscillate between explorations of true form and celebrations of natural beauty. In these compositions, we see that while many of the physical remains of Chinese civilization are lost, their echoes remain for those attuned to their rhythm. Translating the physical qualities of *taben* rubbings and ink painting across media to photography, Taca Sui reconstructs Huang Yi's experience of place. His photographs rewrite Huang Yi's direct experience of antiquity onto landscapes where those physical landscapes are permanently lost. In doing so, they argue for the power of the art to bridge place and time, stitching together multiple artistic responses to a single landscape. These photographs are thus a quiet eulogy for Huang Yi's China, where the past was writ large upon the landscape, if you knew where to find it. But, simultaneously, they are also celebrations of contemporary China and its wild, untamed grandeur.

For Taca Sui, the past is invisible but ever-present, a force that shapes our vision and experience. Landscape and its many narratives—both seen and unseen—are ours to reconstruct and reinterpret. Photography does what our eyes cannot, writing lost traces of the past upon the present. His images thus create a communion between past and present more complete than any before. Not only do his photographs bring a viewer back in time to the mountain landscapes of eighteenth century China, they also transcribe Huang Yi's paintings and rubbings upon images of China's contemporary natural landscape. The past is present in each of Taca Sui's photographs, challenging us to see each landscape for the first time with eyes that are not entirely our own.

Notes

1. Eileen Hsiang-ling Hsu, Cat no. 64 "Seeking Steles on Mount Dai (Taidai Fangbei Tu)," cat. no. 64 in Cary Y. Liu, Michael Nylan, and Anthony Barbieri-Low, *Recarving China's Past: Art, Archaeology and Architecture of the "Wu Family Shrines"* (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2005).
2. Clarissa von Spee, "Visiting Steles: Variations of a Painting Theme," in Shane McCausland and Yin Hwang, eds., *On Telling Images of China: Essays in Narrative Painting and Visual Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2014), 230.
3. Eileen Hsiang-ling Hsu, "Huang Yi's Fangbei Painting: A Legacy of Qing Antiquarianism," *Oriental Art* 1 (2005), 56–63.
4. Wu Hung, *A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art and Visual Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 77–80.
5. R. H. van Gulik, *Chinese Pictorial Art as Viewed by the Connoisseur* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1958), 86–101.
6. Hongru Cai "Huang Yi 'Debei Shier Tu'" (Huang Yi's "Obtaining Steles") *Wenwu* 3 (1996), 72–79.

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