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Review: Shandong photographer Zhang Xiao's 'hometown' exhibition

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Despite the sepia tones, old songs and retro-kitsch cropped-colour portraiture popular in the 1990s, this is no nostalgic reminiscence.

This expansive exhibition uses five photographic approaches to explore life in the artist's hometown of Yantai in Shandong province.

However, despite the sepia tones, old songs and retro-kitsch cropped-colour portraiture popular in the 1990s, this is no nostalgic reminiscence. Zhang probes the flipside of China's urban "miracle", the torpor of village life, with humour, irony and serious social commentary.

Setting the exhibition's tone is a walk through the village, with "elder sister" and her hair salon, taking centre stage. Along the way, life in the village makes up a series of photographs, printed in sections from Polaroid negatives (the paper was pulled from the camera after exposure and thrown away). The resulting photos have layers of meaning.

Yantai is an apple-producing area, and the cultivation and harvest are reflected in the charming flow of the exhibition. But the state is always present, and Zhang balances rural peace by also photographing the corners of village rooms whose walls hold pinned depictions of Tiananmen Square, Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping. These images are at once decorations, talismans and a reminder of a distant, but pervasive, power.

When elderly residents not living in their hometowns were required to prove they were still alive to continue receiving pensions, they sent photos of themselves holding up newspapers. Zhang mocks this clumsy practice by holding up a newspaper from wherever he happens to be.

However, is Zhang actually where he depicts himself, or is he simply providing an expectation of place, any place? Questions such as this make this a riveting exhibition.

Zhang Xiao: About My Hometown Blindspot Gallery. Until June 27

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