

Moon Rabbit – The Chinese Journey

I

I travelled to China for the first time in 1998. The journey took me from Beijing in the northeast along the Yellow River to Kashgar in the northwest of the country. Three more visits would follow, most recently in 2018. It was over this time span of twenty years, that I took my photographs – initially analogue, then digital. At the same time this vast, populous country faced a rapid restructuring of the society. On a different level this period was witness to revolutionary innovations in photographic technology. Both developments had a huge impact on my perception and my conception of images.

‘What a strange thing time is!’ I said, ‘I once lost a love. It’s a long time ago now. But, still, that does not alter the fact that I lost a love.’ⁱ

On my first trips the vistas of landscapes in a predominantly agrarian, multi-ethnic state and the quotidian scenes in urban and rural settings reminded me of pre-modern times in the West. As if I were watching scenes that I knew from historical depictions and portrayals in which, accompanied by political power and exploitation, population growth and decreasing poverty, socio-political and economic developments proceeded over centuries. A kind of historical mirror and at the same time a kind of tableau, on which time seemed to stand still.

... at times the memory of things I must have experienced flutters about me – how otherwise could I remember them! You said so yourself, that things we believe to be memories are in fact the present ... It’s convincing. But then it confuses, too. For it snatches the time, utterly, away from the things we encounter, and often I no longer know where I am in my life.ⁱⁱ

II

The following visits to China extended my view: somehow it should be possible to capture in one life span what is at the mercy of the expanding and accelerating world, if it is not to lose all significance for the individual life itself. I perceived the vanishing of realms of experiences – rural communities with their market places, tearooms and nearby street food vendors – as a sudden loss.

Whenever we are uncertain as to how the things of life connect, we always say: first, and then, later. A place in the calendar! The place in our hearts would of course be quite otherwise: things there that are millennia apart may well belong together; indeed they may well be closest to one another while a yesterday and a today, or perhaps even the occurrences of one and the same breath of air may never encounter one another. Everyone knows it. Everyone experiences it. An entire universe of emptiness lies between them.ⁱⁱⁱ

It was an odd situation, as if time was more alive in me than I was in time. World-time and lifetime intersect in an unusual way. Hence the alienation, and the assumption that the life

awareness of people with a much older, far more distant culture must be a profoundly different one in terms of their experiences today.

III

The simultaneous existence of the seemingly untimely with the timeliness of a mere extension of the present had such a profoundly disconcerting and disquieting effect that I began to capture in pictures the restructuring of a society characterised by the ever more, the ever larger, and the ever faster. It included new mass construction schemes and the remains of ancient residential quarters, the changes in infrastructure and the circumstances of internal migration, as well as the digitisation of daily life, the surveillance and the social credit system.

Picture by picture, that which was disparate yet somehow coherently connected through visual correlation began to occupy a space of its own. These are projections from the past and from the present. Perhaps also from a future in which autonomy and responsibility as well as privacy and distance come to the fore. A narrative that deserves to be told. One day.

We condensed the process of urbanization within four decades. Everything was like collage and montage together in space and time. Actually, I feel I experienced this kind of 'spatial fracturing' and 'temporal desynchronization' since my early childhood. I was born in a small city of Guandong province, where ancient beliefs and the latest technological devices were both parts of our daily life. At that time, and now, even more, the pre-modern, modern and post-modern way of life seemed to co-exist.^{iv}

IV

Initially I went in search of traces of ancient China's wisdom and philosophy. Occasionally, in Taoist symbols, I was able to divine the idea of continuous transition and, in attitudes to life, the conception of a cosmology that also underlies our pre-Socratic philosophy of nature: that beyond all earthly, interdependent and complementary relationships of beginning and end, of coincidence and necessity, of leave-taking and new beginnings, transformations and changes are vital features of nature; and that the idea of emptiness understood as pure potential is timeless in its duration, while as soon as something specific emerges it succumbs to the processes of change, of becoming, and of passing. However, nature and the environment are increasingly created by man, driven by the homogenising power of science, technology and the global market; and, in China, that is compounded by an ever more westernised way of life. A way of life whose precarious aspects in various fields reflect our own approach to the world.

After my last trip I came back with the thought that our challenges are how we handle our fragility and mortality and how to approach our capacity to create meaning. Beyond our natural play instinct, curiosity, and desire to experiment, our limited knowledge of the laws of physics, biochemistry, and mathematics virtually calls forth this capacity. Hence fairy tales or

myths that evoke harmony with nature contain essential values that cultural memory preserves.

In my paintings we see the rabbit as a human. I want you to see the rabbit from the point of view of a rabbit. There is no hierarchy between humans and animals anymore ... We pay them respect and don't look down on them ... In Chinese traditional culture, humans are not the rulers of the world but part of it. Master scholars like Confucius emphasise the humans need to become more like animals, since they are seeking the humble and animals are very humble. We forgot a lot about our humble, animal part ... whether it is a hare or a monkey or a horse, when you're looking at it, you are looking in the mirror.

Why has the painting Moon Rabbit (2010) a round shape?

I made it round because when I was painting, I was thinking of the Buddhist fairy tale of the hare, which sacrificed itself to save Buddha ... as a perfect reminder for humans, his image got transferred onto the moon.^v

When composing my pictures, they were arranged once more by selection, framing and sequence. Convinced that the medium of photography generates attention for our existential concerns and socio-political conditions. Convinced that, through the atmospheric and situational, iconic and symbolic elements inscribed in the images, it directs the eye back to human dimensions. However, the enigma of visibility is not solved in pictures, but doubled. What we see is itself invisible, a game with time. Of that which is lost, the images remain.

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ⁱ Max Frisch, *Bin oder die Reise nach Peking* (1944), 5th ed. (Frankfurt, 1962), p. 38.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, pp. 22–3.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, pp. 36–7.

^{iv} Chen Qiufan, interviewed by Allesandro Scarano, May 15, 2019, in: *domus* online, <https://www.domusweb.it/en/opinion/2019/05/17/chen-qiufan-waste-is-changing-our-society-and-living.html> (last accessed 27 Nov 2019).

^v Shao Fan, interviewed by Kathleen Bühler, in: *Chinese Whispers. Neue Kunst aus der Sigg Collection*, exhib. cat. Kunstmuseum Bern (München, 2016), pp. 50–55.