

Frugal

Like thousands of his photographer predecessors Taca Sui packs everything he needs for his assignment and disappears into remote areas to photograph what he sees. In his case, however, it is not so easy to identify what it is that he brings back with him. There are certainly no identifiable views in spite of the fact that he does not conceal the routes of his several expeditions. A Qing dynasty map showing the heartland of China between the Great wall and the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers which he tucks into his journal provided him with suggestions for his itinerary although much will have changed since it was published. More often than not it is not so easy to determine the season – a parched summer landscape or a light early snow-fall, difficult to say - nor the time of day, whether it is sunrise or sunset we are looking at.

Furthermore, there are scarcely any indications that his journeys took place between 2010 and 2012 since there are no jarring signs of the modern world that can be found in even the most impoverished villages today. Did he travel back in time to find a purer, more picturesque China that existed before the ecological degradation that is characteristic of so much this vast land-mass today? Clearly not since much of what we see in his photographs seems to represent extreme poverty, ruined buildings, fields that are as dry as dust, rivers that have dried up and a total lack of communication with developments in the rest of China.

In one sense, then, the photographs gathered together in *Odes* do give an unvarnished view of the appearance of much of China once you leave the megalopolises and head into the hinterlands, the “unchanging” China of countless villages scattered across the vast country from the coastal plains of the east to the parched desert landscape of Xinjiang and the northwest. On the other hand, they have a timeless quality that relates them in a tangential way to the source of their inspiration, the *Odes* that date from the Bronze Age. Taca speaks of his “search for the broad mountains, flowing rivers, ruined walls and ancient paths of the *Book of Odes*” and of “bringing the work’s amorphous and mystical concepts into reality,” a procedure that is realized by means of textual and geographical

research, followed by arduous journeys in search of faint suggestions of the world that existed when the poems first came into existence.

Taca's photographs do not call attention to themselves. They are so self-effacing that when they are included in a group exhibition as they were when I first saw them in the Three Shadows Photography Award Exhibition held during Caochangdi Photospring in 2011, it is very easy to walk right past them. In contrast with the contemporary subject matter and conceptually oriented photography favored by many of his peers, Taca's subdued images seem to belong to a different generation, one before the invention of color photography and certainly the digital revolution. The platinum prints of the *Odes* include landscapes, interiors, close-up views of vegetation as well as a significant number that by focusing on small details of an ancient stone wall (*Odes of Chen*) or a solitary candle in a niche (*Odes of Qin & Bin*) but they are unified by their square format, small scale and subtle grey tonality.

Taca is a master of *grisaille*, the term used in Western art history for painting in monochrome that forgoes color in favor of subtle gradations of grey. I feel confident he would agree with Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796-1875) who spoke eloquently of the appeal of the in-between quality of tones: "What there is to see in painting, or rather what I am looking for, is the form, the whole, the value of the tones... That is why for me the color comes after, because I love more than anything else the overall effect, the value of the tones, while color gives you a kind of shock that I don't like."ⁱ Of course, there is no need to look for parallels in nineteenth century France for Taca's predilection for grey since classical Chinese painting is executed in ink and the great master of the Song and Yuan dynasties have no parallels in their ability to create expansive landscapes through subtle gradations of ink on paper or silk.

Taca chooses to operate in the limbo between black and white, rejecting stark contrasts between the two extremes and choosing to focus on the middle range where contrasts are greatly reduced and where it is most difficult to make precise identifications. It is like driving at dawn or dusk when the constantly changing light requires heightened attention in order to avoid an accident. He is drawn to

the feeling of unapproachability, psychological as well as physical, that is created by this reductive approach. It creates a feeling of psychological distance that is not dissipated by the close inspection required by their small format and subtle tonality.

Attuned as he is to a certain kind of sensibility, however, one that is cultured and restrained, Taca does not have the remotest interest in using traditional Chinese subject-matter and formal approaches in his photography in the manner of earlier photographers such as Dong Hong-Ai (1929-2004) who imitated the look of scroll-paintings complete with calligraphy and seals. He goes back further in time than any of his predecessors or contemporaries who seek inspiration in the past, back that is to the birth of Chinese civilization in the Bronze Age. Needless to say, as he travels through these remote areas of China there is nothing that can be securely identified as dating from the period when these enigmatic poems were composed. It was a vain quest as Taca would be the first to admit. After three thousand years of continuous cultivation the land itself has acquired a patina, like an ancient bronze which is concealed and protected by rich encrustations as it lies underground. Further changes have occurred, not the urbanization characteristic of the coastal areas of China and much of the rest but a relentless desertification as water-sources dry up and land-cover disappears. What could possibly survive?

Immersed in this poetry and conversant with its elliptical ways of thought, Taca finds evidence of its continuing existence in sweeping vistas such as the study of a solitary figure wading towards a boat (*In the River*) as much as in a claustrophobic cave with offerings to the gods (*Spirit of the Bamboo Grove*), both in *Odes of Wei*. Contrasts abound both within the individual *Odes* and between the nine *Odes* themselves, each of which has a subtly different emotional tone. Whether focusing on a minor detail of an interior such as Behind the East Gate (*Odes of Chen*) or an expansive landscape, Taca's photographs are all noteworthy for their scrupulous attention to proportion and the odd symmetry of their composition. More often than not the horizon line bisects the image and the focal point whether it is the rising sun in the first image of *Odes of Qin and Bin* or a rare human presence aligned with a tree in the middle distance (*Beyond Old Town in Odes of Wei*) tends to be located on the central axis of the composition.

A formalist in search of a “stable artistic structure”, Taca is equally attentive to the most elusive truths of his arcane subject matter and the mysteries of photography itself.

John Tancock

New York, January 2013

ⁱ Gary Tinterow, Michael Pantazzi, Vincent Pomarède, *Corot*, New York, 1996, p. 260