

“An Examination of Mountains and Streams in the Odes”

Preface to Photographs by Taca Sui

The Book of Odes (Shi jing) dates from the Bronze Age, from generations before the unified empire we know as China. It is older than Laozi and Confucius, older even than the widespread cultivation of rice in the Yellow River valley. Obviously it is far older than the invention of photography. But something in the structure of the poems parallels the way a camera works. Let us mentally take a camera apart. The film resides in the darkness of the camera's inner chamber, protected from the light, a pure potentiality of image, and outside the camera, things, colors, seasons, and people pass. A certain set of outside elements are lined up, and suddenly, click, flash! A finger presses a button, light invades the chamber, the image is inscribed on the film (or on the electronic sensors of a digital camera). So, too, in the Book of Odes, the latent meaning of a bird or a landscape awaits the human context that will perfectly align with it, then, click!

In the South are trees with drooping branches,

One cannot rest under them.

By the Han girls go wandering,

One cannot pursue them. (Zhou nan, “Han guang”)¹

The wind blew, and the sky was cloudy;

¹ Translation by Haun Saussy

Before a day elapses, it is cloudy again.

I awake, and cannot sleep;

I think of him and gasp. (Bei feng, “Zhong feng”)²

The click cannot be predicted. A poem with no suggestion of a riddle in the transition between its second and third lines is a poem without a click--and there are such poems: descriptive or moralizing poems that need no creative leap to make them interpretable. Poems without a click do not do what photography does; they do what slower arts do. But the capture of these moments of latent meaning, crossed with an unrelated other meaning, is the great poetic effect of the Book of Odes. Other Chinese verse collections may be more melodious, more dramatic, more moving, richer in narrative and personality. The Book of Odes excels in the capture of images, of instants: what we can call Bronze Age photographs.

A moon rising white

Is the beauty of my lovely one.

Ah, the tenderness, the grace!

Heart’s pain consumes me. (Chen feng, “Yue chu”)³

The “flash” is not necessarily visual. It can be auditory, an overhearing of a voice folded in a scene. But like the seen images, it results from the crossing of two strands of thought at the point where they coincide.

² Translation by James Legge

³ Translation by Arthur Waley

The locusts' wings say 'throng, throng':

Well may your sons and grandsons

Be a host innumerable! (Zhou nan, "Zhong si")⁴

The "click" has long had a name in traditional Chinese scholarship. This swerve of topic-- the poem seeming to talk about one thing, say a tree or a bird or an animal's call, and then abruptly switching to a human situation-- is called the "xing". Xing has many meanings: it can mean to begin, to raise, to lift, to excite, to incite, to make joyous. Chen Shixiang interpreted the character pictographically, reading it as a design of four hands together lifting a tray in a festive dance. Others have noted that the xing usually comes at the beginning of a poem, and therefore can be said to "incite" it. It gives the first call and to it the next part of the poem responds. "The crane calls from the shade, its young answers in return" (The Book of Changes, "Zhongfu"). The xing can be called the riddle to which the remainder of the poem proposes a series of solutions and modifications.

High and large is the south hill,

And a male fox is on it, hesitating, hesitating.

The road to Lu is easy and plain,

And the countess of Qi went by it to her husband.

But since she has gone to her husband,

Why long for her now? (Qi feng, "Nan shan")⁵

⁴ Translation by Arthur Waley

⁵ Translation by James Legge with modifications by the author

The thought process could be described as follows.

“High and large is the south hill”-- so what? Are you telling me something is as big, obvious and undeniable as the south hill, which everybody sees all the time?

“And a male fox is on it, hesitating, hesitating”-- All alone on that big south hill? Why there? (Some commentators read the adjective as meaning “alone and in need of a mate.”) Why seek a mate there? Shouldn’t a wild animal be hiding in the daytime?

“The way to Lu is easy and plain”-- yes, it’s the main highway in these parts, leading from our hilly back country to the big town where the duke has his court.

“And the countess of Qi went by it to her husband”-- Click! Although she was married to the duke of Lu in a proper wedding procession that filled up that road, she nonetheless clung to an incestuous relationship with her brother, supposing she could do things in secret that were as obvious as a red fox on a high hill. (Information supplied by another commentary.)

“But since she has gone to her husband, / Why long for her now?”-- these last lines addressed mockingly to the brother.

The rhyme running through the stanza is set by the word that modifies the behavior of the fox, *suisui*. Its echo in its rhyming partners, *gui* (marry) and *huai* (long for), show that nothing here is accidental. The image of the fox is a snapshot with delayed action, invoking as if by natural cause and effect the two elements of the scandal, “marriage” that does not put an end to “longing.” And all that is laid out on the bald slopes of a north-facing hill.

Sometimes the click or flash happens, not between a visible thing and an implied thing, but between implied things-- say the idea in my head, and your idea about the idea in my head,

and my idea about your idea about the idea in my head. The clash of these implied mental objects happens in a flash of naming and denial.

My mind is not a mirror; -

It cannot [equally] receive [all impressions]....

My mind is not a stone; -

It cannot be rolled about.

My mind is not a mat; -

It cannot be rolled up. (Bei feng, "Bo zhou")⁶

The photographs in this collection don't illustrate the Book of Odes, they evoke its workings in a different medium. They click or flash in the way the poems' parallel lines flash together in a moment of silent coincidence. They pause on something unspoken. They deliver the suspense of cognition.

Taca Sui, as he says himself, has dropped out of some of the most distinguished art academies, engineering schools and journalism programs in China and the United States; he didn't find what he was looking for there. What spoke to him, instead, was the Book of Odes, with its "lucid wording" and "mysterious images" (as he's said in an interview). To prepare for a photographic series based on the Songs, he first spent a year immersed in the classic text and its enormous body of commentary. He worked out an itinerary based on places named in the text, visited them one after another--but without seeking to document the poems' original setting, to illustrate their imagery, or to add another set of footnotes to the three thousand years' worth of ingenuity and guesswork already on the shelves. Rather, in visiting the sites, Taca laid himself

⁶ Translation by James Legge

open to the discovery-procedure already implicit in the poems, and reproduced, not their particulars but their method.

Sometimes a poem is evoked indirectly, punningly, but with pathos. In the “Odes of Wei Series,” “Two Gentlemen” for example: A square image, a weedy field bordering a lotus pond, framed by the hindquarters of two horses. The title and the locale of the image take us back to the poem beginning

When you two gentlemen got on the boat,
Your reflections spread all about;
When I think of you,
My heart is consumed.⁷

The commentary tells us that the “two gentlemen” were victims of a ruthless coup, sent up the river to be murdered, and here remembered by a later speaker. The photograph contains no feature that would make it a document or testimony of the event: no boat, no dock, no river, no attempt to locate any relic associated with the unfortunate two. Only the hindquarters of a pair of horses feeding as unconcerned as the two victims commemorated by the poem, and a fringe of water-loving plants in the background. The horses’ unawareness furnishes the click.

Sometimes the link is less specific. A gauze curtain over a bed, adorned with a lucky wedding ornament, could refer to any number of poems about courtship and marriage in the “Wei feng” section-- the weddings with happy outcomes as well as those whose pain and misunderstanding the poems eloquently document. We don’t know which future will follow, which poem to refer to, and that is perhaps the sense of the translucent curtain.

⁷ Translation by Haun Saussy

Rivers, ponds, trees, bare expanses seem to await the association that will capture them for a human meaning. A bundle of wood on the water? An image of solidarity among brothers or spouses. A birdcage tucked behind a statue? Maybe an evocation of the long-wandering family head, out on interminable government service, in “Junzi yu yi”. A tumbleweed caught high in a tree is as mute as a row of ancient bronze bells-- mute not by nature but by circumstance, as in Wang feng, “Tu yuan”:

When I first came into the world, nothing disturbed me.

When I had lived for a while, I met these hundred cares.⁸

The Book of Odes is anonymous poetry, and the photographs of Taca’s “Examination of Mountains and Streams” are lit by an overcast sky, the lack of shadows and the sense of a 360-degree light source paralleling a collective poetry’s impersonal point of view. Like the Book of Odes, quoted to underline a point by everyone and anyone, from Confucius and the diplomats of old to Mao Zedong, Ezra Pound and Gary Snyder, the objects of these photographs are an invitation to appropriation, not a command to agree or disagree with the photographer’s “moment of truth.” These “new topographics” are curiously empty of people, only a fleeting two-legged presence here or there. Under the conditions of present-day China, their bare and empty space is a pastoral interlude, a retreat, a deliberate understatement. What does fill their space is the atmospherics of an imagined time when the mind was open to suggestions: a reserve of film, stored away in the dark, awaiting its flash or click.

⁸ Translation by Haun Saussy

He has reared his hut on the level height,
That large man, so self-collected.
Alone, he sleeps and wakes, and sleeps again.
He swears he will never tell of his delight. (Wei feng, "Kao pan")⁹

The need to make a space of potentiality, distance, self-possession, and freedom from immediate ends has led Chinese artists to get off the beaten path and look around them for three thousand years. Fortunately some, like Taca Sui, have been willing to "tell of their delight."

Haun Saussy

⁹ Translation by James Legge