

## Shanghai, Yesterday, at Dawn...

### Musings on Gong Jianhua's Photography

In photography, I am often prejudiced by first impressions. Indeed, the camera lens and shutter are double-edged swords, and perhaps also a mutual paradox. The camera, by its very nature, demands a relentless flow of creativity to serve the lens, the shutter, the darkroom. Yet, the camera lives in the hands of some photographers. Consider Robert Capa (1913-1943), who documented the reality of fleeting events. His example further causes me to recount, with a twinge of regret: if you compare all the shackled dancers in the realm of Art, photographers certainly have it the worst. In the trenches of the art world, it is also the most difficult for photographers to cut themselves an escape route, because "to mirror reality" is often taken as an unflattering remark in the world of art.

Robert Capa died on a smoke-filled battlefield, clutching his camera. His life was secondary to his photography. He left the agonized expressions of fallen soldiers. He also left Picasso's bright face and wise eyes. Altogether, he left a record of a wondrous, bygone era's subtle details and straightforward reality. For this legacy, we are truly indebted to great photographers. They have dutifully recorded both critical and commonplace historical moments and created uniquely beautiful and hideous memorials honoring the ephemeral past.

Looking at some of Capa's pieces, I often think of Gong Jianhua, darting around and making his way through Shanghai *longtangs*<sup>1</sup> for all those innumerable years.

In his early days, Gong worked for a Shanghai audiovisual publishing house as a photojournalist and editor. He was responsible for taking headshots of famous television and movie stars for magazine covers. Initially, Gong dreamed of charging the battlefield like Capa, camera in hand, amidst the sound of gunfire, bugles and victory marches practically imprinted onto the film; photographing celebrities was just a job, a means to a daily bowl of rice. Nevertheless, Gong learned to view the world through the camera lens, focusing his gaze more intently upon Shanghai's innumerable *shikumen*<sup>2</sup>, watching how those buildings – which were originally meant to house only 72 families – would often be filled with 144 families, or 288 families, all within a Shanghai *longtang*.

In Gong's eyes, metropolitan Shanghai is not reduced to mere decadence and debauchery, neon lights and Nanjing Road. Nor does his work offer a few moments of reprieve within the riot. It is not full of French parasol trees standing like beautiful maidens along Huaihai Road. Gong looks beyond the long-gone "Ten Miles of Foreign Settlements", and he isn't interested in the perfumed old dreams of wanton and luxurious lifestyles. He didn't have much sympathy for the old classes in their Western suits, speaking foreign languages with Suzhou inflections, humming "The Merry Widow". Gong's take on Old Shanghai emphasizes the ups and downs of the quiet masses. He tries to capture the very soul of the people. At times, the life of his Shanghai appears helplessly mundane, like a private temple contained within the whorls of a spiral conch. Gong's vision is intimate, worldly, caustic and pitiless, neighborly, palatable, classifiable and countable, knows the whole story, keeps to itself and never intrudes upon others. You can love it, loathe it, spurn it or savor it, the taste of his Shanghai.

Thus, this photographer, who had taken so many celebrities' photos, would often carry his precious camera, that technically superb implement weighing a little more than three kilos, and

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<sup>1</sup> *Longtang*, or *nongtang*, are dense alleyways characteristic and specific to Shanghai.

<sup>2</sup> *Shikumen* are "stone gates", a local style of housing within a *longtang*.

creep through the twisted back alleys and narrow crooks of Shanghai's gray *longtangs*. Twenty years of shuttering his way through wind and rain, twenty years of photographs.

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Let our eyes fall upon that photograph with the old woman scrubbing the toilet – this toilet, a common prop in the daily life of Shanghai's petty urbanites, gently carries us to the realm of yesteryear. The photo takes us to that somewhat bittersweet, somewhat humorous past, takes us to that Old Shanghai that has been shoved off into life's unnoticed corners where there remains a bit of light gray poetic meaning, the five flavors of human life pulped into a special taste that follows the *click* of Gong's shutter. He sets his frame in front of a wall mottled with scattered vines, on a bamboo handle scrubbing a gradually fading deep vermilion toilet. We can't see the furrowed face of the photo's subject, but it's not necessary – that curved, bent waist hints at the unspoken stress in the crevices of her life. The atmosphere of the photo is cold and heavy, but nevertheless, Gong has not forgotten to hide a piece of beauty within the portrait – an inky thick, black block – a door, which subtly exposes a human form, an aged but pliant body, with the hewn gravity of a statue.

I believe that the actual purpose of Gong's realism is impressionistic in nature. The photographer's lens, aside from recording the images of Shanghai's past, also traces intentions, and expresses the sentiments towards Shanghai within the photographer's heart. This is Gong's starting point.

In "The Flood", ordinary folks are powerless against the will of heaven, but though their old home is riddled with leaks, the children turn this into a prime opportunity to row boats. The big bath basin becomes a boat, their arms are oars, rudders – no matter where they are born, even if they are born in a tough environment, children all have the right to happiness. "Combing Her Hair" strikes a similar chord in a different key: an image of a vain, young woman in a dark *longtang* groping her fine hair. At night, maybe she changes her clothes, shoes, socks so that she can go to the Grand Cinema, cracking buttered melon seeds with her teeth during a romance. Familiar echoes of hawkers' calls in a vegetable market combine with his pictures to form a representative pastiche of Shanghai mornings. A steaming kettle of fried beancurd in thin rice noodle soup, pan-fried dumplings, *dabing*, fritters, soy milk, salty, sweet, flat silver pomfrets scattered all over the ground, blood clams, baby bok choy, bean curd with Chinese cress – how those rich flavors are impossible to forget!

In the *longtangs*, innocent young women enchant you with their delicacy and elegance, their dimpled, coquettish smiles and alert eyes. With a sidelong glance, they pretend they're on the cover of a magazine. A few snips of their scissors can turn Italian and Japanese fashions into more economical Shanghai *Seventeen* styles. Listen to a *guniang* speak in a soft Suzhou accent, peppered with a bit of gentile Shanghai speech, and your feet are led by your wandering eyes – five bus transfers, seven streets, twelve turns, and when you're just on the verge of giving up, at last you'll climb two flights of stairs and you're there – the *guniang* and her father and grandfather and grandmother all squeezed into their back room. Outside the window, clotheslines cross and double-cross. An array of sleek pajamas and diapers hang like the world's flags against the backdrop of dilapidated tenements. Mirthful laughter once drifted through the opaque space of this *longtang*, but it is now altogether quite unusual, belonging to a scenic corner of the city's past, constructing a vision that only exists in Old Shanghai. This is the Shanghai captured within Gong's lens, a city after his own heart, burdened with melancholy and lingering nostalgia, masked by the hazy morning fog of yesterday's Shanghai. His repeated visits to the *longtangs* fostered a sense of intimacy, but never disgust. This is why he was able to freely photograph,

without complaint, without regret. Unquestionably, the beauty of his art has been built upon the world's "ugliness" at its foundation. For Gong, who was born, educated, and raised here, Old Shanghai is the full terrain of his art, a bottomless wellspring for his photography.

Gong Jianhua has told me more than once that Shanghai's urban space drastically influences its inhabitants' outlook on life. The moneyed heights of the Pudong financial district, rising story above story like sorcery, will never blot out the memories of the masses who dwelled so far beneath them. Who among us can say how anyone's destiny was subconsciously shaped by Old Shanghai? How many of them were inevitably driven to part from this kind of existence? Who knows – maybe that *guniang* back in the *longtang* is now a white collar worker, or a tycoon, heavy with money. She's a globe-trotting entrepreneur now. Perhaps she's even a renowned professor, or an artist. How many of those from the *longtang* left that life behind only hesitantly, bidding a fond farewell on their way to a better life. A comfortable life, a happy life, many would even settle for a busy life – provided they weren't cramped in a room over a kitchen with three generations living under a single roof!

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Gong is diligent and laborious; he believes that hard work is the only work worth doing. Every time he sees me, he's cradling a fat stack of new photos. He directs his refined sense of perspective toward the romance of Shanghai's *longtangs*. From within the high walls of Tilan Bridge Prison, under a banner bearing the slogan "A truthful confession begets leniency", Gong employs the mundane trivialities of these "criminals" to locate the root of humanity. As for Shanghai's new districts, Gong still has a mission to document and evaluate them – today's vigorously thriving Shanghai will surely become the future's Old Shanghai, however fatalistic that may seem.

In the US, Berkeley has already become synonymous with anti-war demonstrations; San Francisco's annual Gay Pride Parade is carnivalesque to the extreme; nudists on the beach get naked for the sake of getting naked and showing off their heavenly bodies; and in the old forest groves of Sichuan, the national treasure of China, the giant panda, chomps on bamboo. Gong hasn't been idle. He continues to document it all, shooting away. I believe that modern technology and digital tools will streamline his artistic process, but he will remain true to the original objects of his affection – manual cameras, and Old Shanghai, yesterday, at dawn.

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