

Tchan Fou-li — Inventing Hong Kong Pictorial Photography with the Charm of Chinese Culture

Pioneering Chinese photography theorist Liu Bannong (1891-1934) mentioned in the *Beiping Guangshe Society Annual* vol. 2 (1928), that Chinese photography ought to have its own identifiable character distinguished by unique Chinese tastes and charm. He felt that Chinese photography should be differentiated from photographic works made in other regions of the world. While Chinese photography did attain a level of beauty in its representation at that time, it was also genuinely concerned with the discovery and expression of unique Chinese qualities. Likewise, today's Hong Kong photographers are influenced by western photography yet remain strongly rooted in Chinese culture. Master photographer Tchan Fou-li is an innovative local photographer who has created many ethnically rich photos. To detach Hong Kong photography from the context of western pictorialism, he posited that "landscape photography should honour the tradition established by Chinese painting" and promote a "composite-style of photography and painting". He has worked his entire life to apply the aesthetics of Chinese painting to photography with a vision of eventually creating Hong Kong photos imbued with those same aesthetics.

Tchan was born in Chao'an, Guangdong Province in 1916 and graduated from the Guangdong Provincial Second Normal School in 1934. Influenced by his father who loved painting and music, Tchan greatly enjoyed Chinese painting and classical Chinese poetry. His sound knowledge of literature and art provided a solid basis for his launch into photography. In 1944, Tchan immigrated to Vietnam to run a business where his interest in photography blossomed. He acquired from Chen Fangqu sophisticated darkroom techniques of film development, colour temperature and gradation control. In the early years, he was also impressed by the creative ideas and style of Lang Jingshan (1892-1995), a first generation master photographer in China. One can see Lang's influence in Tchan's montage works which he created by overlapping and synthesising negatives images. These resulted in photos which resembled Chinese paintings. Works like *Lost* (Fig. 1) and *Harbinger of Spring* (Fig. 2) produced in the early 1950s were made in this manner. The hazy drizzle falling on a river with tree branches in the foreground is reminiscent of a "one corner" composition led by painter Ma Yuan (1189-1224) in the Southern Song Dynasty. The composition is attractive in its expression and emulation of the atmosphere found in Chinese painting. The rich black-and-white gradation reinforces the ambience and similarity to those visual effects found in the Chinese ink painting.

In 1955, Tchan moved to Hong Kong as a businessman. Shooting as an amateur photographer at the time, his photography was influenced by western realism in the way that he focused on depicting the lives of ordinary people. Although shot in various countries such as Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia, photos like *Survival* (Fig. 3), *Cheerful Rain* (Fig. 4) and *Anticipation* (Fig. 5), all reveal compassion and sympathy for the unfortunate masses. These photographs burst with local colours and the spirit of life. Hong Kong photographer He Fan (1937-) wrote a review of these photos in 1959 critically acclaiming Tchan's talent to shoot with "decisive timing". Thanks to his mastery, Tchan's images have always captured his subjects at precisely the right moment at their most vivid and lively. Indeed, his works are admired together with those of western realist masters. In the early 1960s, Tchan advocated a new approach of "portraying the real object in collaboration with the skill of pictorial depiction" for capturing subjects from everyday life. Portraits from this era truly and most successfully exemplify the marriage of art and real-life subject matter.

In 1959 and 1962, Tchan revisited China, his motherland, which he had left more than twenty years earlier. He photographed landscapes in Guilin, Guangxi Province, and Huangshan, Anhui Province. These experiences were utterly inspiring for his work. Deeply fascinated by the natural beauty, grandeur and serene ambience of China's picturesque landscapes, he created a series of exquisite photos depicting personal sentiments and the poetic charm of Chinese painting. Works like *First Light* (Fig. 6), *Misty Mountains* (Fig. 7) and *Morning Glory* (Fig. 8) provided the framework for his unique developing artistic style of ethnical rich landscape photography. In 1962, he wrote an essay titled "Chinese Pictorial Painting and Landscape Photography" in which he advocated that it was essential to learn from Chinese painting when shooting landscape photographs. Furthermore, he argued that the use of monochromes in black-and-white photos is very similar to the way in which three-dimensional textures and forms are represented with varied ink intensity in Chinese painting. He said that it was only when the colours of objects were simplified and refined that their essences and qualities could be conveyed. As for composition, Tchan thinks that the spaces created in landscape photos can enhance the spatial feeling of solidness and emptiness much like the commensurate types of spaces do in Chinese painting. By shooting spectacular panoramic mountain views with wide-angle lenses and then cropping them to a longitudinal composition, he infused lyricism and poetry into the resulting photographs of these majestic mountains. A sense of depth created by means of multiple perspectives and the spiritual feeling evoked by the use of ink gradation in Chinese painting are thus created. In *Misty Mountains* from 1962, Tchan simplified the forms of objects in a composition of Chinese literati painting. Alternating airy and solid spaces are created with clouds and mist, while the celestial beauty of the landscape is portrayed with flat light and colours in medium tones. The picture, suffused with warm light and shadows, projects a flow of rhythmic vitality in this image of a remote place. As is the case with traditional ink painting, the resulting impression is quite poetic.

Looking back on the decade of the Cultural Revolution, Tchan confesses it coincided with a void in his photographic career. Political turmoil in China caused him to experience perplexing and painful feelings. Many questions arose at that time about the future of photography and his creative activities generally ground to a halt. The only piece of work from this period is *Surge of the Sea* (Fig. 9) from 1967 which features a lone boat braving swells upon a raging sea. In this photo, Tchan makes an allegory of his concern and sentiment for his home country. At the end of the Cultural Revolution, Tchan resumed his photographic pursuits. In the early 1980s, he was committed to finding a way to lift his ethnic photographic style to a higher level. Promoting a "composite-style of photography and painting", he asked many renowned Chinese painters to adorn his photos with supplementary brushstrokes. These masters included Huang Yongyu (1924-), Wu Guanzhong (1919-), Li Keren (1907-1989) and Liu Haisu (1896-1994). The successful joint exploration between Tchan and the master painters who so candidly demonstrated their individual talents during this collaborative creative process resulted in true examples of "composite-style of photography and painting". Photos from this era include *First Sign of Autumn* (Fig. 10) and *Shadow* (Fig. 11), in which supplementary brushstrokes provide an added degree of liveliness. Tchan's original idea was to elevate the level of art photography by blending it with painting and thus inviting a kind of art exchange. This approach was, however, quite controversial amongst fellow photographers. In 1984, *Photo Pictorial* featured printed discussions that lasted for nearly six months. Some photographers felt that the "composite-style of photography and painting" was not faithful to the

personal identity of the artist. Others claimed the photographer failed to precisely develop the final pictures. Views were numerous and varied since fellow photographers held differing views on combining photography with painting. Most did agree that these unprecedented works had made significant contributions to the development of Chinese photography. Looking back on what Tchan did some twenty years ago, his work actually consisted of multimedia art cooperation and was indeed very innovative.

In addition to juxtaposing photography with painting, Tchan's photographic style has undergone another significant change since 1980. Influenced by the east-meets-west fusion favoured by Chinese painters of the 20th century, Tchan attempted to merge western painting composition with Chinese pictorial aesthetics. In 1982, he came up with *Thinking of You* (Fig. 12), a photo based on a symmetrical cross-composition originated from contemporary western painting that arranges ordinary objects into geometric forms. This work successfully emulates traditional Chinese painting, as well as the charm of modern abstract ink painting. *White Walls* (Fig. 13) and *Autumn Leaves* (Fig. 14) from 1990, on the other hand, zoom into selected parts of objects. They create strong visual impact and their style tends to be more minimal and abstract that present day modernity. The effect of *White Walls* calls to mind Wu Guanzhong's *Twin Swallows*, a classic painting of rural towns in the southern Jiangnan region. Both adopt a theme of light colours with white walls and black roofs. Both share simple elegant composition, strong colour contrasts, and penetrating lines and shapes. They perfectly depict western modern art and are also brimming with the poetic warmth of Chinese painting.

Lang Jingshan felt that Chinese photographers had the responsibility to promote the depth and richness of Chinese culture and to attract more people to discover and appreciate it through photography. To Tchan, blending eastern and western cultures and creating photographic works with the poetic quality of Chinese painting has been a lifelong aspiration. Tchan is the founder of the Chinese Photographic Association of Hong Kong, a body composed mainly of Chinese members. He has placed significant effort in promoting Chinese poetic photography and has also published photographic magazines like *Photoart*, *Photo Pictorial* and *China Tourism* all of which have effectively popularised photography. He has been instrumental in promoting the development of tourism in China through photography and has creatively pushed local pictorial photography to be ethnically rich. He has made a far-reaching historical impact on Chinese photography and his masterly style has earned great admiration among viewers from the Mainland and overseas alike.

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Plates

Fig. 1

Lost

Tchan Fou-li

1952



Fig. 2

Harbinger of spring

Tchan Fou-li

1953

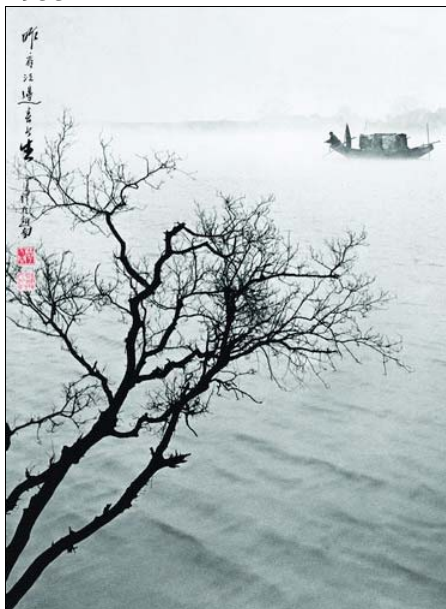


Fig. 3
Survival
Tchan Fou-li
1957



Fig. 4
Cheerful rain
Tchan Fou-li
1958



Fig. 5
Anticipation
Tchan Fou-li
1960

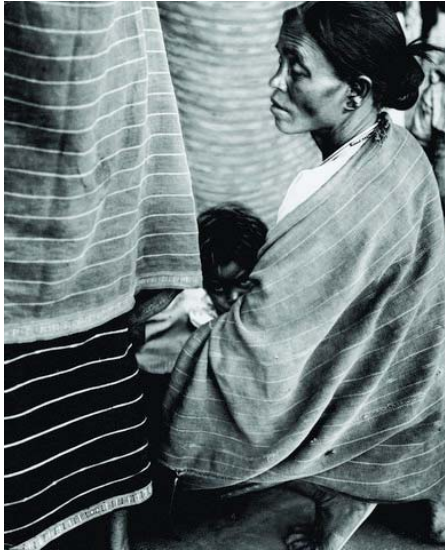


Fig. 6
First light
Tchan Fou-li
1959



Fig. 7
Misty mountains
Tchan Fou-li
1962



Fig. 8
Morning glory
Tchan Fou-li
1962



Fig. 9
Surge of the sea
Tchan Fou-li
1967



Fig. 10
First sign of autumn
Tchan Fou-li
1983

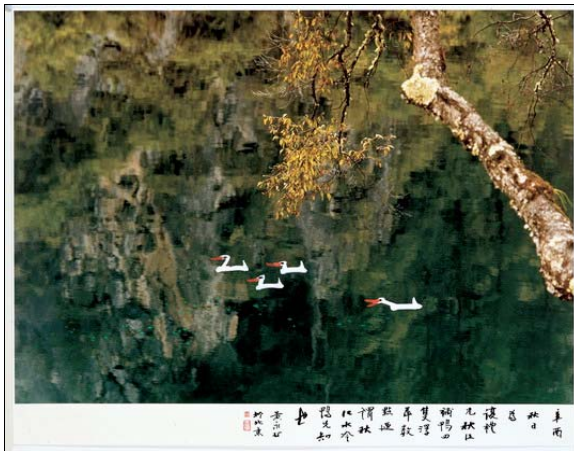


Fig. 11
Shadow
Tchan Fou-li
1990



Fig. 12
Thinking of you
Tchan Fou-li
1982



Fig. 13
White walls
Tchan Fou-li
1990



Fig. 14
Autumn leaves
Tchan Fou-li
1990

