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September 27, 2014

Ian Teh's Changed Chinese Landscapes

BY **EVAN OSNOS**

When the British-Malaysian photographer Ian Teh first worked in China, more than a decade ago, he rendered it as a nation of people in Technicolor. He gravitated to the overcrowded, humid corners of a country on the make—the traders’ bars, the workers’ dorms, the truckers’ lounges arrayed across the industrial heartland of China’s north. The opening picture in “Undercurrents,” his first book, peered out of the windshield of a jeep bumping along the Sino-Russian-North Korean border, a dazzling pink plastic flower mounted on the dashboard and visible in the foreground. Where there was no color, he found it—in the fluorescent bulb of a street-food stall and the red glow of a massage parlor, even in the mounds of coal that became, in his capable hands, a spectrum of blacks.

In the years since then, Ian Teh’s images of China have changed. The more he travelled, the less he sought to focus on the individuals swept up in the country’s transformations. He was looking, he told me, for a way to capture “the price we ultimately pay or will eventually pay for our collective ambitions.” He left the industrialized eastern third of the country and ventured out to the places where people were trying to reengineer their land in service of a new life: the construction sites and power plants and slag heaps. The color calmed down, the movement slowed. He found a new visual register (a nearly perfect inverse of the world he had once documented)—a China of subtle grays and pale chemical yellows, and sweeping, battered landscapes. He travelled along the Yellow River, “the soul of a nation,” as he called it, which was running so low that, in 1997, it failed for the first time to reach the sea. Eventually, he went to the origins, to the river’s source, depicted in his latest work here and in an exhibit, “Traces: Navigating the Frontline of Climate Change,” on view at Photoville, in Brooklyn. (Teh is one of two inaugural Abigail Cohen Fellows in Documentary Photography, a fellowship organized by the Asia Society and Magnum Foundation.)

The farther Teh has ascended into the hills, the more fundamental his critique has become, even as his images have grown deceptively more serene. There is, often, a harsh dissonance between the images and their captions. At Ngoring Lake, in China's western Qinghai province, he captures a moment of stillness and reflection, a perfect horizon—which is undermined by the discovery that the water level in the lake is rising because of melting permafrost and increased rainfall and snowfall due to climate change. To those who know what they are seeing, these are images of protest. In the age of the selfie, Teh has returned to the classical monumental landscape. Amid the throbbing of construction cranes and car horns and the bleating of cell phones, his work reminds us of a haunting silence. In a country that is clamoring to get ahead (the first foreign advertisement in the Chinese press after the Cultural Revolution was for a wristwatch), these are images with no markers of fashion, no slogans or brand names to signify when they were made. It might be tempting to see Teh's work as a retreat from our moment, a search for timelessness. That would be a mistake. This series is an alarm, an announcement of terrible beauty, heralding the advancing threat that we pose to our planet.

One of the contradictions in China today is that, on paper, the government has a raft of stringent environmental regulations, intended to protect the air, water, and soil. In practice, those rules are often ignored, because of corruption, cronyism, and abuses of power. The Chinese describe that as *renzhi*—"rule by man"—the invidious real-world substitute for the elusive "rule of law" that they have sought, for so long, to create. Teh has chosen to depict the world's most populous country as devoid of people. In removing "man" from the land, if only for an instant, he has struck a quiet blow in favor of the China it aspires to be.

[Ian Teh](#) photographed “*Traces: From the Frontlines of Climate Change Along China’s Yellow River*” as a 2014 Abigail Cohen Fellow in Documentary Photography. The fellowship is a joint initiative of Asia Society’s [ChinaFile](#) and [Magnum Foundation](#).



In 2000, after China’s Yellow River had begun to dry up in the warming climate, government officials started a program to protect its source, Sanjiangyuan (“Three River Source”), in Qinghai province. Ngoring, pictured here, is a large freshwater lake in the Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve, as the project is known.

PHOTOGRAPH BY IAN TEH



The Tibetan Plateau, which stretches north from the Himalaya, is called the third pole because of its impact on Earth’s climate. PHOTOGRAPH BY IAN TEH



The Sanjiangyuan Reserve would, in theory, attract tourism. But, after a downturn in the national economy, China halted many real-estate projects, and construction on this hotel came to a sudden stop. PHOTOGRAPH BY IAN THE



Building a transportation infrastructure to support the burgeoning mining industry in Qinghai has altered the landscape. Roads cut through the plateau, and open pits abut protected wilderness. PHOTOGRAPH BY IAN TEH



For centuries, the grasslands of Qinghai fostered a communal system of open pastoral grazing. In the nineteen-eighties, that changed, following economic reforms that allowed some people to take ownership of the land. Fences altered grazing patterns, and the animals, confined to smaller areas, damaged the fragile landscape. PHOTOGRAPH BY IAN TEH



One controversial aspect of the Chinese government's efforts to address ecological degradation, according to Human Rights Watch, is the resettlement of Tibetan nomads into "new socialist villages." The program, implemented in 2006, has relocated as many as two million people. PHOTOGRAPH BY IAN TEH



Northeast of Ngoring Lake, a residential development rises on the plateau. The Tibetans, who once occupied homes made of woven yak hair that were built to be moved around, now live in permanent structures. PHOTOGRAPH BY IAN THE



A viewing tower on the frozen banks of Ngoring Lake rises above China's highest wetland ecosystem. PHOTOGRAPH BY IAN TEH




In Qinghai's Madoi County, which encompasses Ngoring Lake, hundreds of lakes shrank or disappeared between 1990 and 2000, according to one study. PHOTOGRAPH BY IAN TEH

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