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EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Apocalypse, or, the Logic of Late Anthropocene Ruins

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In his stunning, sobering book of photography *Abandoned Futures: A Journey to the Posthuman World*, Tong Lam asserts that, “in a way, we are already post-apocalyptic” (Lam 2013, section 011). To understand such a statement in the context of his photographs—including the photo essay titled “Unreal Estate and China’s Collective Unconscious” that this piece accompanies—we must first detach the notion of *apocalypse* from its usual biblical connotation. If the Christian version confirms the centrality of humanity to God’s plans, for better or for worse, then what we are dealing with here is something like the opposite; the revelation provided by these photos is at least in part that of the rather pathetic hubris of the human species in its fleeting age of planetary dominance, even in the case of China in the midst of head-spinning transformation.

Insofar as it refers generically to the end of an age, *apocalypse* has several distinct connotations for this photo series. First, it suggests the collapse of the communist dream with the failure of the Cultural Revolution, followed by the general counterrevolutionary trend of postsocialist China in the decades after China merged with, and eventually even embodied, the global juggernaut of capitalist modernity. Second, *apocalypse* here connotes the collapse of *that* modernity as well. That is, we are faced with the traversal of the ideological fantasy of modernization itself, whether capitalist or communist; we see the impossibility of the total scientific and technological dominance of nature, of economic growth being potentially infinite even though resources are finite, of the notion that one species can systematically transform and destroy its own habitat without eventually confronting the disaster it has created. Thus, a third implication of *apocalypse* has to do not just with the end of the age of communism or of capitalism but with the finitude of the Anthropocene epoch itself. The original Greek *apocalypsis* means literally “uncovering” or “revelation,” and one thing that Lam’s photographs uncover with

their deanthropomorphized gaze is a world in which human creations eventually fade into and join a background of objects and processes that long preceded and will long follow them.

In perhaps the most striking image of the “Unreal Estate” photos—“An aerial view of Xiancun at night”—a ring of gleaming, futuristic high-rises surrounds a cluster of squat, darkened buildings of tile and cast concrete. History is spatialized—the future surrounds a stubborn past that is destined for oblivion but refuses to gracefully disappear. As a “village in the city” (*chengzhongcun*), Xiancun exemplifies the spatial and class politics of China’s transition from state socialism to state capitalism. Back in the revolutionary age, “the countryside surrounds the city” described not just Mao Zedong’s strategy for communist victory but also his rural-focused development model. In the post-Mao era, as the tongue-in-cheek title of Robin Visser’s *Cities Surround the Countryside* (2010) implies, the roles are reversed, and it is now the cities that surround the countryside—quite literally in the case of Xiancun and other urban villages, in which what were previously rural towns are enveloped by the expansion of China’s numerous vast metropolises. In countless such instances, the government seeks to purchase the formerly collectively owned land and demolish the old buildings to make way for new development, inevitably by government-connected developers. The predictable corruption involved means that the locals who may have lived on the site for generations receive minimal compensation, while the developers and local officials eventually get rich on the transaction. It is, in other words, an example of how the primitive accumulation of early capitalism is repeated in contemporary China under postsocialist modernity: a lucky minority have the power to seize resources, and the rest may be physically, economically, and socially displaced in the process. Occasionally the local residents put up a fight, as in the case of Xiancun, in which some residents refused the compensation package offered to them. Even Xiancun’s residents, however, in many cases moved out of the area and instead rented their spaces to even less lucky rural migrant workers trying to survive in the surrounding big city of Guangzhou.¹ The swallowing of the rural village by the monstrously expanding postsocialist city encapsulates the reversal of rurally centered Maoism in today’s China.

Mao’s determination to wrest the realm of freedom from that of necessity resulted in the most audacious successes, as well as the most infamous failures, of the Chinese revolution. His distinctive twist on Marxism-Leninism was his insistence that the sheer political will of the masses could alter what seemed to be the inevitable historically and materially determined

course of human events. The odds that a few pockets of rebellious peasants could prevail over a Nationalist army backed by both the Soviet Union and the capitalist West appeared so remote that the eventual victory of the revolution seemed to bear out Mao's faith: vast rural China could leapfrog the historical stage of industrial capitalism and enter that of communism by the pure force of revolutionary will. Of course, the ultimate failure of the Great Leap Forward and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution arguably resulted from the same absolute "belief in the historically situated capacity of mass activity to change the circumstances of life" (Karl 2010, 118). This failure arose not simply from Mao's peculiar vision, however (the tendency to cast Maoism as the mere result of a personal pathology or private hunger for power is as wrong as it is ubiquitous), but from an awareness that the alternative was the much-despised "economism" of party bureaucrats with a more measured reform approach that accepted entrenched social inequality as the price of economic success. Mao's fears that such an agenda would eventually betray the most radical implications of the revolution were fully realized after his own death, to the extent that the official memory of Mao himself has been largely reduced to that of the patriotic founding father of an ongoing political regime. A rusted old locomotive, an abandoned factory: some of the modern ruins of Lam's photos are reminders of a now mostly suppressed alternative modernity, an abandoned future of liberation from capitalism itself.

Capitalism has little time for freedom except as adornment; the profit imperative compels greed as inseparable from progress, and in China's version it has become oddly impossible to distinguish clearly between long-term infrastructural investments by the government and private development driven only by short-term profits. International investors and academic economists periodically wonder if the economic miracle has created a potentially disastrous cluster of Chinese bubbles—in finance, real estate, and the entire emerging consumer economy.

In Lam's images of the abandoned theme parks in Wuhan, Chengdu, and the Beijing outskirts, as well as of the "ghost mall" of Dongguan, do we not precisely foresee a post-bubble future? In fact, the ruins of China's postsocialist-capitalist modernity are already overtaking those of socialist modernity. They are readable as the far outstripping of consumption by production in a hysteric mentality of growth at all costs. The developers and officials who dreamed up these projects imagined a future of leisure-seeking consumers that never materialized on the sites in question. A moss-covered displaced sphinx fails to beguile any children with its ersatz charm; an imitation castle is seen by no humans other than farmers; a

sunlight-filled twenty-first-century shopping arcade goes unstroled by any postsocialist Chinese flâneur. The entire dream (American, Chinese) of consumer capitalism seems to have vanished, leaving only desolate, mute artifacts that are already fading into a postapocalyptic ecology (how long before weeds are growing *inside* the sun-dappled abandoned shopping mall in Dongguan?).

If in the images of Xiancun we can see the socialist past as it is replaced by the future (the surrounding buildings of Guangzhou's new central business district), the photos from Ordos raise the question of the life-span of those surrounding buildings as well. How long will it be before they too are in ruins? Fifteen years? Fifty years? Five hundred years? The sand dune that, if only in a trick of perspective, appears to be gradually burying a phalanx of towering, unfinished buildings in Inner Mongolia reminds us that even Beijing today is periodically coated with the dust of creeping desertification (adding to its usual coating of particulate pollution at concentrations up to dozens of times the "unsafe to breathe" level). Historical time begins to collide visibly with geological time. The bizarre lake in the middle of Xiancun, out of which buildings seem to rise, serves as a visual harbinger of what many coastal metropolises all over the world will look like in a century or two, after any remaining inhabitants have given up on warding off rising sea levels. The life of countless buildings as ruins will so far exceed their life-span of human use that it will seem they are almost natural environmental features, gradually eroding, disappearing, and transforming like everything else. Indeed, as philosopher Graham Harman points out, while we (post)modern thinkers, after the "linguistic turn" in philosophy, cannot fail to note the cultural "constructedness" of all our conceptions, including that of nature, "it is equally impossible to ignore the naturalness of subway tunnels and giant electrical grids (this latter realization is the one that is usually missed)" (2010, 82).

Such a profoundly deanthropomorphized gaze provides the truly uncanny aspect of many of Tong Lam's photographs. Sand erodes a concrete wall, tiny bit by tiny bit. Standing water imperceptibly laps at a pile of rubble or rusts a tangle of thick, discarded cable. Railroad tracks that used to help build a socialist future are now gradually covered over with dirt, weeds, and dead branches, perhaps someday to become just an odd fossil within a gigantic block of sedimentary rock. We cannot help but imagine these scenes as eventually having no human observer at all; rather than a modern subject apprehending such objects, there will be only the objects themselves "prehending" one another, to use the Alfred North Whitehead term recently revived by Harman's object-oriented philosophy: objects may not be "conscious" of one another,

but they encounter one another, coming up against various kinds of resistances and weaknesses in their mutual interactions, transforming, destroying, becoming one another, or disappearing altogether into larger wholes.² The posthuman gaze at modernist ruins reminds us that, no matter how many new objects we produce, consume, and discard, those objects will in many cases far outlive us and the purposes to which we put them. The fake sphinx may go unappreciated by any human observer, but its head will continue to make a fine perch for a bird.

Such speculation can of course become sensationalist in the way that apocalypse almost inevitably does when narrated within culture. (Where would Hollywood be without the end of the world?) Thought experiments provoked by books such as the New York Times best seller *The World Without Us* (Weisman 2007) may lead as easily to lurid scaremongering or smug nihilism as to profound reflection. Tong Lam himself struggles with the accusation implied by the branding of this type of photography as “ruin porn,” or the passive consumption of the images “as mere spectacle” (Lam 2013, section 001). Comparing the images in the 2013 “Unreal Estate” exhibition at the University of California, Berkeley (and in this online issue of *Cross-Currents*), with his photography book *Abandoned Futures*, Lam states that he “intentionally selected some less spectacular images for the exhibition” in order to avoid being “too seductive” (a danger the book mitigates as well with its accompanying short essays) (2013, section 001). In fact, in both groups of photos, the aesthetic beauty of the image is irrevocably tied to a certain sublimity that also has a broadly political function insofar as it evokes trepidation at the decentering of the human (and the modern). As Lam notes in the book in response to any possible “ruin porn” accusation, “after all, is it really possible to appreciate these images without thinking about the condition of our own existence?” (2013, section 001).

Exactly what sort of thinking is thereby provoked? It seems to me that these images have the same sort of sobering value as Quentin Meillassoux’s concept of *ancestrality* or *diachronicity*. By *ancestrality*, Meillassoux means the problem posed to thought by the scientific realization that the world—life on earth, the planet, the universe—existed long before there was any human subject around to observe it, think it, or objectify it. He expands the concept to the more general case of *diachronicity* to refer in addition to our understanding that the universe will continue long after any human perceivers are gone. These are facts that, Meillassoux insists, no modern philosophy since the “linguistic turn” is capable of grappling with *as fact*, rather than as cultural construct; instead, “correlationist” thought from Kant to poststructuralism “ratifies the

impossibility of thinking any reality that would be anterior or posterior to the community of thinking beings” (Meillassoux 2008, 50). But this is precisely what we must think if we are to get over ourselves.

What are the consequences, then, of facing the possibility of our end—an apocalypse of modernity, or even of the human species itself? Tong Lam’s photography, like Meillassoux’s philosophy, encourages us to reconsider our “species solipsism,” to *get outside of* ourselves to “the *great outdoors*, ...that outside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is, existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not; that outside which thought could explore with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory—of being entirely elsewhere” (Meillassoux 2008, 50, 7). Such thought, evoked for me by the posthuman gaze of these photographs, does not simply remind us of “the omnipotence of chaos” (though it may also do that) (Meillassoux 2008, 71). The realization of the fragility of our projects, of our own lack of anything remotely resembling centrality or essentiality in the context of the cosmos, leads us not to an accelerated destruction, but rather to a clearheaded process of reacquaintance with our own limitations. We are led to confront the fact that we, like every other species or object, both affect everything around us (whether we know it or not) and are no less caught up in networks and feedback loops that we all too often have failed to even consider as we undertake the various grandiose projects of modernity.

Such a realization, far from reducing us to helpless consumers of spectacle or paralyzed victims of our own catastrophes, may allow us once again to simply step outside and have a look around, to consider objectively what we have wrought and think seriously about a new relation to the world.

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Notes

- 1 Thus, in a Youtube video claiming to show a Xiancun building being “demolished with people inside,” the lone figure appearing in the window of a building only inches away

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- from one being torn down may well be a migrant laborer, not an original resident. Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzhShY5oX2c, accessed February 12, 2014.
- 2 An early introduction by Harman to the term *prehending* can be found in his 1997 essay, “The Theory of Objects in Heidegger and Whitehead” in *Toward Speculative Realism* (2010, 37).

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