

Chinese Puzzles

by Theodore Dalrymple (February 2015)

One picture, said Mao Tse-Tung, is worth a thousand words, and in a sense he was right. A thousand words cannot describe adequately your current visual field, or even the tiniest part of it (I don't think you should even try); but neither can pictures adequately convey what you are able to say in words. We don't have different faculties for nothing.

I used rather to despise books that consisted mainly of pictures, but recently I have changed my opinion. (Even what I consider to be recent has changed with age, ten or even fifteen years ago now seeming to me quite recent). I don't go as far as Alice, who doubted the use of books without pictures; but neither do I any longer doubt the use of books without words, or almost without words. Perhaps childhood and second childhood are the ages at which one appreciates pictures in books.

It is possible that my new-found appreciation of picture-books is a sign of cognitive decline: that I no longer have the patience, concentration or memory to read great blocks of print (perhaps the young never will, thanks to electronic screens of all kinds). But I do not think so, I still regularly read tomes that others might consider intimidating in density and length. There is also the possibility that I have changed my mind simply to prove to myself that I am still capable of doing so, that I do not suffer from that condition that a brilliant friend of mine called the *hardening of the concepts*, worse even than hardening of the arteries (though sometimes associated with it). But again I do not think so. Rather it is that, thanks to the passage of time, my memory is now so well-stocked that images easily evoke the recollections or associations that are the principal consolation of one's declining years. This is also one of the pleasures of browsing in second-hand bookshops: a recollection or association evoked by chance is more pleasurable than one that is systematically search for.

Last week I came across (and bought, despite its extravagant price) a book of photos titled *L'Empire Céleste*, the Celestial Empire. As this would suggest, it was a book about Imperial China, though in fact there were also pictures in it of the republican period up to the 1930s.

My connections to and with China are few and tenuous. I have been twice to the country; the first time convinced me that China's industrial pollution is a serious problem (and that was only at the beginning of China's dramatic economic growth!), and the second time was to report from Peking for a newspaper on a giant United Nations jamboree there on the condition of women in the world. At the press conference given by a British minister, who in her brief

preliminary statement demanded that the health of men and women be equalised, I asked whether this meant that men should live longer or women should live shorter. A British civil servant stepped forward like an adult protecting a child (the minister) and said that my question was not serious and therefore unworthy of an answer: an answer that the minister in any case could not have given because she had by then grown so accustomed to the sound of her own platitudes. For myself, I thought that my question went straight to the heart of egalitarian philosophy, but that of course was its problem.

When I was a child my father had a multi-volume pictorial history of the war (it was called *Hutchinson's Pictorial History of the War*, and I still recall its heavy green embossed covers). I spent many hours looking at it, but the one photo that affected me most was of China. It was of a dead baby in a flimsy makeshift coffin in a field of rubble with ruins in the background, and no other human in sight. I must have been less than eleven years old at the time, for we moved when I was eleven and the books did not come with us. That one picture more than any other gave me an early appreciation of the horror of war, though like any other boy at the time I enjoyed making models of the aeroplanes that helped to bring it about.

My maternal grandparents were refugees in Shanghai, but they died at the end of the war and are (I believe) buried there. I was surprised to discover after my mother's death that she had received letters in England from them throughout the war, presumably through the good offices of the Red Cross. One of the letters to her from her father in Shanghai said, 'It is a beautiful spring morning and the sun is shining brightly, but there is no sun bright enough to penetrate the dark clouds that are covering the whole earth.' He went on to express the belief that one day the clouds would clear, but his hope was clearly less strong and more hypothetical than his despair, the reasons for which were all too real and evident. He died at just about the time the clouds were clearing, in 1945, but had he remained in China he soon would have seen them gather again.

There are a few photographs in the book of Shanghai as he would have known it, but of how he lived, in what conditions, I have no knowledge. My mother's sister, who was also a refugee in Shanghai and learned good Chinese, never wanted to talk about her past and it did not seem right to badger her into doing so. As the ancient Confucian sage, Xun Zi, put it, to talk *à propos* is a sign of knowledge, but so is to remain silent *à propos*. Now that she has died I shall never know, and can only surmise.

The photographs taken at about the time of my grandfather's arrival in the city do not make it look desperately poor, at least not by the standards of, say, the Calcutta of the same period. No one is wearing rags, everyone looks purposeful and busy. It is true that the wheeled

traffic is shared between smart cars and rickshaws, and the pulling of rickshaws have always seemed to me the acme of human indignity, one man straining all his usually cord-like muscles to pull another man sitting back in comfort; but there is certainly no atmosphere of desperation in the pictures.

Did the camera lie? Not in the sense that it produced an image of what was not there to be seen, or in the sense that something had been airbrushed out in Stalinist fashion. But of course no number of photographs could capture the whole of reality, and everyone who wields a camera has a point of view, something that he wants to convey to others, and many things that he does *not* want to convey to others. Even the framing of a photograph for purely aesthetic reasons excludes what disturbs a composition, an ugly building next to a beautiful one, for instance. The camera is susceptible to all the rhetorical tricks of speech.

One's ideas can be upset or overturned by a photograph, both for good and harm. In this book, for example, there is a double page picture of opium smokers in a Hong Kong opium den of the 1890s. In the picture, five men, all of them young except for one, take their ease in a décor that is the Chinese equivalent of Victorian clutter. They are clearly men of refinement, and one young man looks severely intellectual, with round spectacles and a faraway look, as if imagining the answer to some deep scientific question. The scene is the very opposite of the degradation one immediately associates with the term *opium den*, and one is morally certain that the men in the picture, who are probably of the merchant class, are by no means rendered incapable of normal life by their facultative resort to the drug, no more than a man who drinks in a bar must be rendered incapable thereby of meeting the demands of normal life.

In his wonderful book about China titled *On a Chinese Screen*, published in 1922, that consists of many short and brilliantly economical chapters of description, Somerset Maugham extols an opium den that he visits as being much more civilised than the average bar or pub in England. What does this tell us, apart from that our prejudices might be wrong? It raises at least the possibility that opium smoking in China was not as nationally debilitating as is usually claimed, and indeed there is one modern school of Chinese that claims precisely this. The question cannot be answered, however, merely by looking at one picture or by reading one verbal sketch by Somerset Maugham: the photographer or Somerset Maugham may have found the one opium den that was not sordid as, for example, the opium den described by Dickens at the beginning of his last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, is sordid.

Another layer that obtrudes between the photographs and the direct apprehension of the reality of which it is all too easy to suppose that they must be a representation is the choice among all possible photographs of China made by the editors of the book. Because of that choice, one

might suppose, for instance, that public execution played a large part in Chinese life about the turn of the century (the nineteenth to the twentieth, that is), a supposition that could be either right or wrong.

The most startling of these photographs is of a public execution in Peking in 1908. A man is held down with his arms behind his back by two others kneeling beside him, the executioner bringing down a sharp sword on his neck with an intense chopping motion. In the foreground are the decapitated corpses of two men already executed, their heads removed, blood from the stumps of their necks soaking into the ground. The neatness of the severance gives some idea of the sharpness of the sword used by the executioner.

The executions seem to be taking place in a very informal fashion. The crowd of spectators, including three European soldiers (one of them a sergeant), looks on with intense interest, and very close up, almost cramping the style, if I may so put it, of the executioner himself. There is nothing like a beheading, it seems, to draw a crowd, and one suspects that the executioner takes a pride in, and even enjoys, his work. The Moslem beheaders of western hostages are only too aware of the pleasures of decapitation, both for a prurient audience and for the sadistic performer. Man is not so much a wolf to man as the executioner of man.

Another photograph taken at about the same time is of men being slowly strangled to death by a strange apparatus consisting of a wooden cage inclining at an angle, in which they are suspended by a wooden halter which lifts them above the ground until they suffocate. There are four such apparatuses in view, but only two in current use. In the background, life goes on as if nothing unusual were taking place: which perhaps it wasn't.

There are other photos of condemned men, in one case of a boy with a chain round his neck connected to a heavy stone, presumably to prevent his escape. And we see also two accused men arriving in court to be questioned: they crawl on the ground, unable to stand because of heavy wooden halters around their necks.

Were these photos taken to prove to a western audience how savage were the Chinese and how much in need supposedly of a western civilising mission? Perhaps. But there are also many photographs that prove the exquisite refinement of Chinese civilisation. It is false, wishful thinking that is, however, often expressed in the hope that repetition will make it true, that civilisation is indivisible, that in all respects (art, architecture, the treatment of prisoners) it marches in unison ever forward and upward, as if it were a North Korean parade. We should never succumb to the complacent idea that because we are advanced in some respect or other we are therefore incapable of barbarism, or that because our telephones work so well our

art or architecture must be similarly advanced.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is