

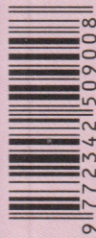


RAW VIEW

ON CONTEMPORARY DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

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Mountain + **Manik Katyal** Intimacy,
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Me or Kill Me

#03



The Way to The Golden Mountain

XIAOXIAO XU

Xiaoxiao Xu returned to her home region to document what was left of it, and those who had stayed behind. At the same time she was travelling back to her childhood.

TEXT *Anni Kössi*

Xiaoxiao Xu moved away from her native China when she was a teenager. She has lived half of her life now in the Netherlands, but still misses her home country. Leaving China behind left Xu with an endless desire to find out who she was. She explores her roots through photography.

Xu was born in 1984 in Gangtou village, near the city of Wenzhou. The village is poor and lies in a mountainous region where arable land is sparse. People have moved to Europe from this area since the 1960s, mostly for economic reasons.

THE CITY THAT WAS LEFT BEHIND

Xu's mother was one of the people who left. She moved from Gangtou to the Netherlands in the early 1990s. Xu, seven years old at the time, did not go with her mother and was raised by her aunt in Wenzhou.

Wenzhou is a port city of three million people in Zhejiang province. It is famous for being a city from which many people have left to live overseas.

"My home region was surrounded by water. Perhaps the location makes people want to sail away," Xu reflects.

The city is intersected by the Ou River. As a child, Xu lived near the river in an area where no doors were locked.

"The whole neighborhood was one big family," Xu remembers. That communality was what Xu missed the most when she moved to the Netherlands as a teenager. Though her mother and many of her family members lived there, Dutch society still felt very foreign.

Ten years after moving away from China, Xu decided to return to Wenzhou. Reaching the city, she headed for her old neighborhood only to discover that all the houses had been replaced by skyscrapers. She was lost. For Xu, the old riverside houses had represented both the city and her home.

At first Xu was shocked by all the changes. But, led by her memories, she wandered to areas she had once known and loved – or what was left of them. Although many of the places she remembered were gone, she started to feel at home again. She enjoyed the smells, the buzz of conversation, and the breakfast stands. Just being back in Wenzhou made her incredibly happy, and with curiosity she observed her old hometown and its inhabitants.

"It's difficult to say if I'm still one of them."

TRAVELLING BACK TO CHILDHOOD

Xu began to recognize her native country as her own. Still, she continued to feel a level of estrangement and wanted to retain the distance it allowed. She started to document the city with her camera. Xu let her intuition lead her to the favorite spots of her childhood, like the flower and fish market.

In China, goldfish are a symbol for abundance, wealth, and harmony. Xu is moved by these small, calm, and elegant creatures, which often appear in her photos. In addition to the public market, she also made pictures of goldfish swimming in small plastic and glass containers at her aunt's apartment.

"I was surprised by my aunt's creativity. I admire the way Chinese people come up with new ways to use everyday objects. I believe that is typical of the Chinese mentality: you need to yield and adapt. Beauty can be found in everything," Xu notes.

In 2013, four years after her Wenzhou trip, Xu made another shooting trip to China. She traveled to her birthplace of Gangtou village, where most of the Netherlands' Chinese immigrants hail from. Today there are one thousand inhabitants in the village. Because many immigrants send money home, the farmers' economy has improved considerably.

When Xu walked into the village the first thing she saw were the villas. Her grandmother and uncle now lived in a five-storey villa, and her cousin's had seven levels, but only

three of them were furnished. "As the villagers see it, the more storeys your house has, the more respectable you are. More and more people build on the mountains. The whole village looks like a construction site," Xu tells.

Xu's old home by the mountainside was abandoned. From the house you could see to the river, which in years past had to be crossed to get to the city. Now the river was dry and a highway ran over it. The rice fields, Xu's old favorite spot in the village, was now a row of factories.

THE DREAM OF THE GOLDEN MOUNTAIN

Xu accepted her loss. She collected the images from her Wenzhou and Gangtou trips into a book which was published last year by the Swedish publishing house, Sturm & Drang. The book is called *The Way to The Golden Mountain*.

"In people's minds, the Western world is a place where you can easily make money and get rich. It's called 'the dream of the golden mountain.' Immigrants who send money home don't tell about the hard work or the long hours they have to do overseas," Xu explains.

Chinese immigrants living in the Netherlands are Xu's greatest source of inspiration. First generation immigrants are often in the restaurant business and they work extremely hard – twelve hours a day, seven days a week throughout the year.

"The main reason for living like this is the desire to earn more money and improve their quality of life. This kind of heavy work is demanding both physically and mentally," Xu says.

For fifteen years, Xu also worked in restaurants. The heavy work scared her. But she understood that the catering business kept people's dreams alive, and she got interested in the people in the kitchens and behind the counters.

Xu wanted to know what drove people from another side of the world to a place they know nothing about. She wanted to hear where they came from, what their homes were like, and if they had family waiting for them there. She also wondered about the lives of the people who stayed behind.

"As I began asking these questions, I started to feel that my own background was like a hundred-year-old faded photograph that was buried under my feet. There is so much that I don't know."

HOME IN PHOTOGRAPHY

With the help of photography, Xiaoxiao Xu has been able to explore all the things, places, and people that intrigue her. She has been able to alleviate her sense of seclusion – the way she feels like an outsider in both of her home countries. By making pictures she has begun building a place for herself.

"When I ended up studying photography, it all fell into place. By making pictures, I can express myself and tell about the things that are important to me."

Xu still misses her old home country, but now she sees it in a different light. She finds it hard to imagine living in China. In Wenzhou everything is fixated on money.

Xu's photographs carry a strong sense of presence. At once they manage to depict something very personal and universal. Yet more than anything they convey a feeling of longing.

China, for Xu, is a source of creativity, and she wants to continue by shooting in other areas, not just her childhood milieu. In 2014 she traveled to the barren countryside of North-West China to document the traditional Chinese New Year celebrations there. Now, in 2015, she is still photographing in China.

"There is a lot for me to discover."

While Xu discovers new things in her country of birth, she also discovers new things within herself.

"To me, the dream of the golden mountain stands for an aspiration toward beauty and better self-understanding. Money is not important to me. I hope I can discover a peace with my inner world."

"It's difficult to say if I'm still one of them."