

2005



Stormy Days

A typhoon arrives the night I return to Zhanjiang in September 2005. The morning after the storm I borrow a battered old bicycle and set out for Long Wan. It has been five years since I last visited the village.

The weather still feels unstable but I decide to go to the village anyway because I will only be in Zhanjiang for a few days.

I ride my bicycle out of the city and down the road to Ma Jong. Once again the roads and buildings have changed. I arrive at a crossroads but am unsure which road to take. I ask two pedicab drivers for directions but neither has heard of Long Wan.

I start down one road but can't find any of the familiar landmarks. I decide to return to the crossroads because I'm not sure I am going in the right direction and the weather is still unstable. Dark clouds gather overhead.

But the wind is blowing hard now. The palm trees sway wildly in the wind. The sky grows darker by the minute. The typhoon is reviving.

I take out a bottle of water and start to drink from it when a gust of wind blows the cap out of my hand and sends it tripping across the roadway.

I get off my bicycle and try to chase down the cap but the wind is too strong and the cap is gone. I look behind me and see my bicycle toppling in the wind. I struggle to get back to my bicycle but the wind almost blows me down.

It blows so hard it sucks the water out of my bottle and soaks my shirt. It rips the camera bag out of my hand and blows off my hat.

I struggle to get control of the bag and put it more securely around my shoulder. A string around my neck saves my hat from blowing away completely.

People in a nearby restaurant laugh at me as I struggle against the wind. They laugh a little harder because I am a foreigner.

I wait for the wind to let up but it blows even fiercer than before. A heavy rain starts to fall and the streets flood with water.

I drag myself to a storefront restaurant. The wind lifts and topples a pedicab passing in front of the building. Everyone runs for shelter to escape from the driving wind and rain.

I stand inside the restaurant and wait for the wind and rain to stop. I will return to Zhanjiang as soon as the bad weather passes.

I ride to the village in the back seat of Liang Han Wei's company car. When I was here five years ago he was riding a motorcycle, but this time he has a car. Jie Zai, a friend of mine from the past, sits in the passenger seat beside him.

Liang Han Wei puts a CD into the stereo and turns it up loud. Scarborough Fair by Simon and Garfunkle and Hotel California by the Eagles play on the stereo. It feels strange to be riding through the cane fields listening to Hotel California blasting on the stereo. The deep past converges with the present as I float through the Chinese countryside.

We park the car and walk through the village gate. A huge new stage and a basketball court have been built beside the village school. Every time I return to the village I find a new project has been completed.

Money flows into the village from outside and the villagers use it to improve

their lives. The last time I visited there was a new school and village gate; this time it's the opera stage and the basketball court.

I start to photograph a group of young men and women standing on the stage. I don't know what they are doing there. I don't see anyone I recognize among them. Too much time has passed since I first came here in 1990 and the faces have changed.

Many of the people who knew me have died or left the village to live with their children in the city.

The village is so quiet. Only young women, children, and elderly men and women walk the lanes now.

I ask an elderly woman and man sitting in a courtyard if I can talk with them. They invite into the yard and pull up a chair for me.

The man appears to be recovering from an illness. An empty wheelchair sits under a tree behind him. It's the first time I have seen a wheelchair in the village.

The woman says she remembers me from many years ago and even spoke to me in the past.

She says she has three sons and three daughters, all of whom live outside the village now. Her eldest son is 35 and works in a sugarcane refinery in Xuexi; her youngest son works in a printing factory in Zhanjiang; and her middle son works in a shipyard in Guangzhou. She says one of her sons went to college and was assigned a job after graduation.

She says life in the village is improving but Long Wan still has a long way to go. The farmers have better farming techniques now, better seeds and fertilizer, she says. Agricultural science has helped the villagers improve their yields.

I continue down the path but most of the courtyards are deserted. I take photos of fragments - windows and doorways, village lanes, water buffalo staring out at me.

I want to visit the village's ancestral temple, but Jie Zai is uneasy with my plan. He says we have to be careful about entering village temples if the villagers don't want us to go there.

He must worry that bad luck will follow him if he goes against the wishes of the villagers and visits the temple with me.

Instead of going to the temple we take a walk through the lowland fields. A new pagoda and pavilion is visible in the distance. I ask a passing farmer what it is and he says it's a new cemetery for the city of Zhanjiang.

Big bulky construction trucks rumble down a newly paved road that leads to the cemetery.

A light rains starts to fall and my friends seem anxious to leave. I climb back into the car with them. We speed through the cane fields with Hotel California playing loud on the stereo.

I leave the apartment early the next morning and set out on my bicycle for Long Wan. I have a premonition that this will be my last trip to the village. I feel no pressure this time to find anything in particular. I will let the day carry me wherever it will.

I pedal calmly through the morning light. I feel stronger now than I did a decade ago. Back then I used to get tired pedaling up the hills, but today I could pedal for hours.

It's the first full sunny day I've had since I arrived here. The typhoon has finally passed and the sky is calm, clear blue and cloudless.

I pass the entrance to a new freeway and look for the road that weaves through the countryside. In 1989 there wasn't a freeway here. Slowly the city encroaches on the countryside. Factories, offices, and highways close in on the village.

I ride along the quiet country road that cuts through the fields. The sugarcane rustles in the breeze, whispering the way I remember it doing the first time I came here. Elegant long-tailed birds dart across the fields.

I ride through Mao village, which is bustling with activity today. Men sit at small tables smoking water pipes and playing Chinese checkers. One man sits on the ground and stitches on a sewing machine. Children call out *mei-ge-lao mei-ge-lao* (American ghost) as I pass.

I ride into Long Wan and park my bike next to the opera stage. The same young people I saw yesterday are standing on the stage. I ask them if I can take their picture and they say yes.

One man stares hard at me and starts to complain. He waves me away but a passing villager tells him I have been visiting the village for many years and that I mean no harm.

I walk deeper into the village. I approach a farmer guiding an ox-drawn cart down a village lane. He stops the cart and asks me where I am from and how I came to be here. I tell him an acquaintance from Long Wan took me here in 1990, and I have been visiting ever since.

I ask him if I can take his photo and he says he's not dressed well enough to have his picture taken. I say there's nothing wrong with the way you're dressed. He shrugs and lets me take his picture.

I walk through the lowland fields but there is hardly anyone working there. There are just a few farmers weeding and watering rice plants. The rice crops are almost ready for harvesting. They wave in the wind, green and perfect.

I walk up to the village ancestral temple, approaching it cautiously because of what Jie Zai said about visiting the site yesterday.

I photograph it from the outside. I go up to the door and look inside. The village gods that used to rest on an altar inside are gone now.

They must only bring them out on special occasions; they must be afraid to leave them unattended in the temple.

I don't go inside the temple because I too am a little wary of what could happen to me if I ignore the wishes of the villagers.

In the distance the new Zhanjiang cemetery rises along the horizon, altering the view from the lowland fields. In the past, when I looked out on the lowland fields, the rice paddies appeared to stretch as far as the eye could see.

A woman working in a field beside the temple says the Zhanjiang government built the new cemetery on land it purchased from the village.

I follow a path above the lowland fields that leads to the Buddhist temple. Along the way I start to see dogs. In the past I never saw a dog in the village. I don't know if the dogs are kept for protection, food, or as pets. Most of the dogs are tan-colored but here and there I see a black one. The dogs eye me suspiciously as I pass but don't growl or bark.

The noonday sun beats down as I approach a huge gate and what I think must be the Buddhist temple. When I was here five years ago a new temple was under construction, but the new building I saw wasn't much bigger than the original one.

I walk through the gate and pass a group of men and monks. They seem surprised to see me.

I am amazed by the transformation. There's a main temple and a smaller temple in front of it. The monks' living quarters are located in long buildings on either side of the temple.

I stop in the smaller temple and photograph statues of a laughing Buddha and Guanyin.

As I'm leaving, the head monk approaches me and invites me to have lunch at the temple. I'm not really hungry and don't want to inconvenience him but I accept his offer when he insists.

He takes me to the temple kitchen and a worker sets down a vegetarian meal in front of me. The head monk, who is young and friendly, sits across from me and asks me questions in Mandarin as I eat.

A group of monks and nuns and a few temple workers gather around us as we talk. They say I speak Mandarin well but I know they only think this because we are discussing simple subjects.

I don't have much appetite because of the heat. I can't finish all of the soup and rice and feel guilty for leaving it behind.

The head monk invites me to return to the temple the next time I am in Long Wan. I thank him for his generosity and tell him I will.

I pass through the temple gate and start down the road to the village. It's the hottest hour of the day. A motorcycle suddenly speeds through the temple gate and stops beside me. The driver offers me a ride even though he already has a passenger on the back.

The monk must have sent him out to give me a ride back to the village. I hesitate to get on the back but he insists there is room for another person. I climb on the back and a few minutes later I am standing at the village gate.

My time in Long Wan is drawing to a close. The lanes and courtyards feel so empty, almost abandoned now.

I set off down the path in search of a few last images. I try to photograph a group of villagers in a small village store but they wave me off, saying they don't want me to take their picture.

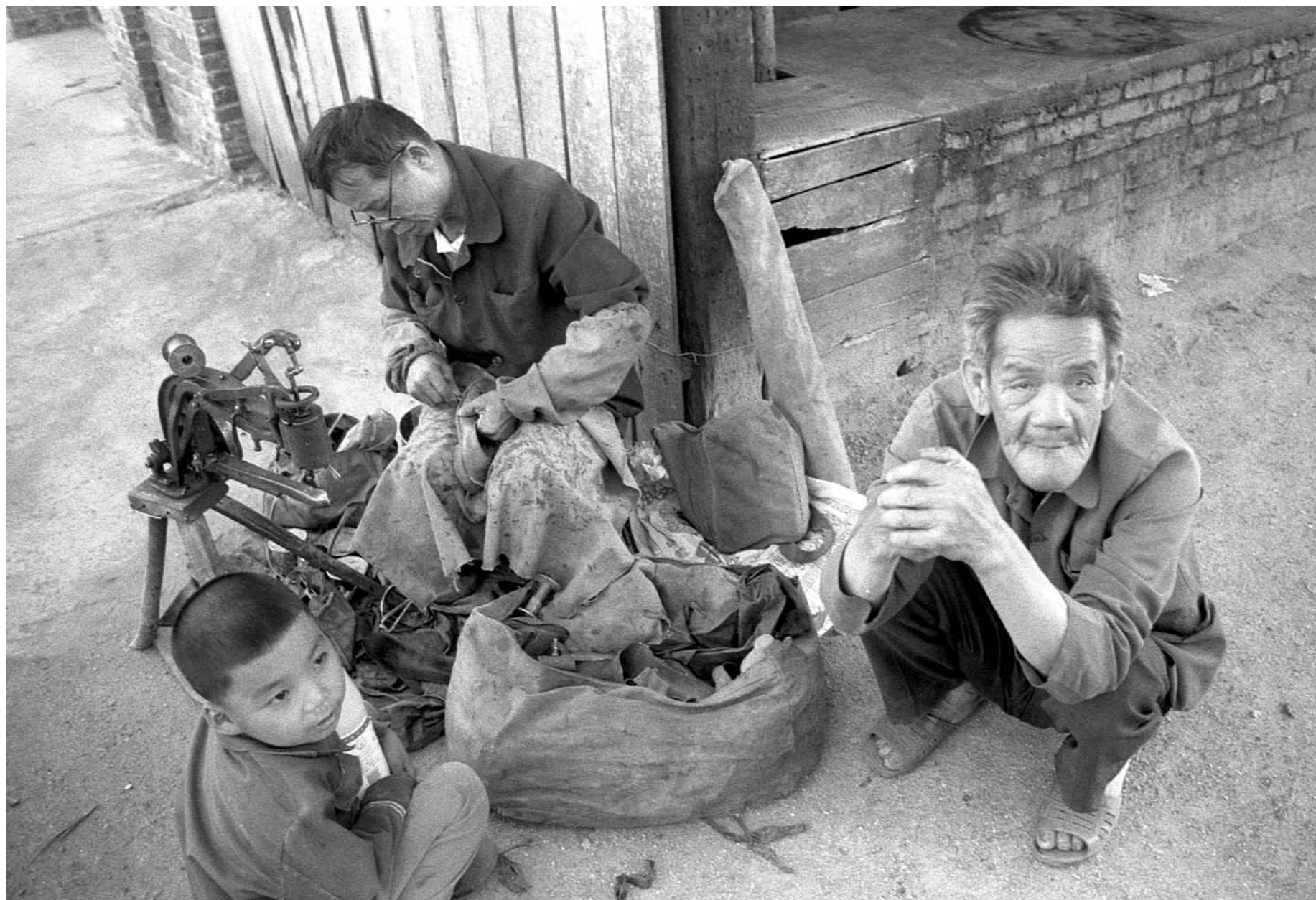
I walk my bicycle through the village gate. An old woman approaching in the distance starts to run when she sees my camera, almost tripping to avoid it.

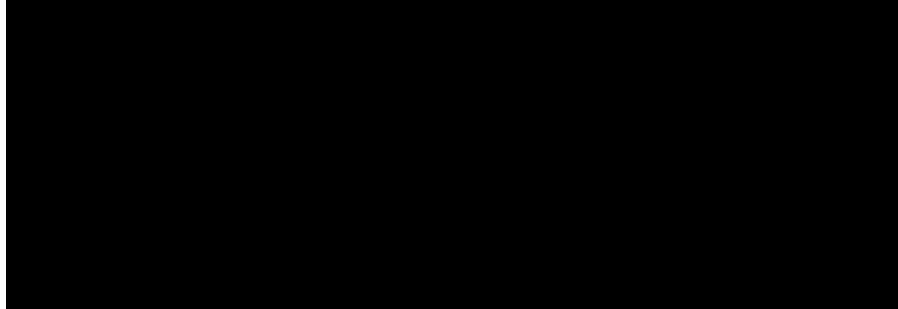
I climb on my bicycle and quietly leave the village. I feel like a ghost now. Most of the villagers who knew me when I first came here have disappeared. All I have now are my pictures, these bits and pieces of stories.

I ride past the cane fields toward Mao village. A schoolboy rides up behind me and calls out very quietly, Megelao, Meigelao (American ghost, American ghost).

I turn off the village road and head down the highway, unsure if I will ever come this way again.

October 23, 2005









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