

FINANCIAL TIMES

# HOW TO SPEND IT

17 OCTOBER  
2020



## BEYOND THE GLASS CEILING

AMANDA LEVETE is building the FUTURE

PROPERTY SPECIAL INSIDE

PLUS ——— PHOTOS OF A FORGOTTEN BEIJING — HACK YOUR CIRCADIAN RHYTHM — INSIDE THE WORLD'S POSHEST BOOKIES

# HOW TO SPEND IT

17 OCTOBER 2020



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# HTSI

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**S**tories move in funny currents sometimes. I first heard from Patrick Dransfield in October 2017. As an *FT* reader in Hong Kong, he wrote to me following a column I had written in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein scandal and the rampant sexism that still exists in film. He recommended I should detox with the work of the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu.

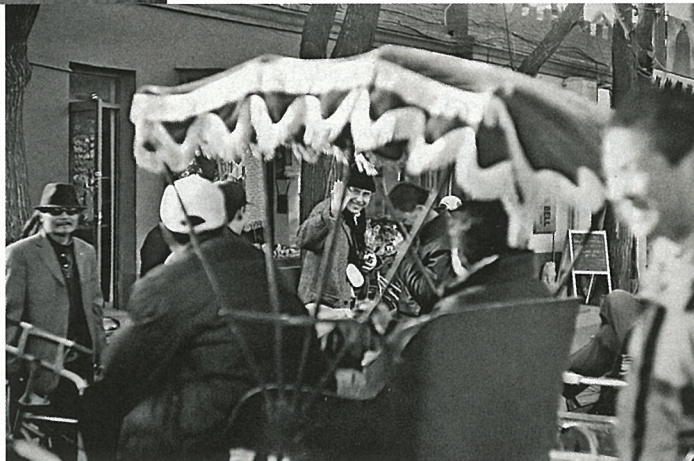
This sort of note is not unusual. Despite the rather faceless exchange of modern technology, I am surprised by how many of the *FT*'s readers are kind enough to email me their various recommendations and thoughts. One chap sends me updates of his paintings. Another used to regularly share pictures of his Alpine views. Not everyone is so generous with their opinions, but even when the criticism is biting, I find it heartening that anyone should still feel passionate enough to write.

Patrick and I picked up a sporadic correspondence. But my interest was really piqued when he sent me a picture taken many years ago while he was working as a junior teacher in Beijing. The photo was of two young boys in Shanxi province dressed in worker jackets. It could have been taken 50 years earlier than 1986. As Patrick's note observed: "It has been fascinating to see folk move from the above uniform to developing a sense of individual fashion with all that that entails."

Struck by this snapshot of a near-forgotten China, captured just 10 years after the end of the Cultural Revolution and on the cusp of massive redevelopment and infrastructural change, I wondered if he had further images of this society in transition. Bags of them, he assured me, most of which he hadn't touched in the decades in between. When he had a chance to look through them, he'd send me what he had.

Three years, several emails and one pandemic later, Patrick's hoard has finally made it into *HTSI*. "My Beijing Spring" (page 32) traces his observations as a young but enthusiastic amateur photographer, and offers a fascinating portrait of a way of life that has since immeasurably changed:

the villages have been razed and rebuilt as hubs of technological endeavour, designer logos have replaced the worker jacket as the consumer market for luxury goods in China has outpaced all other regions in the world. The pictures are currently on show at The Foreign Correspondents' Club in Hong Kong, and I hope that they might find their way into a book.



### ONE READER USED TO EMAIL ME PICTURES OF HIS ALPINE VIEWS



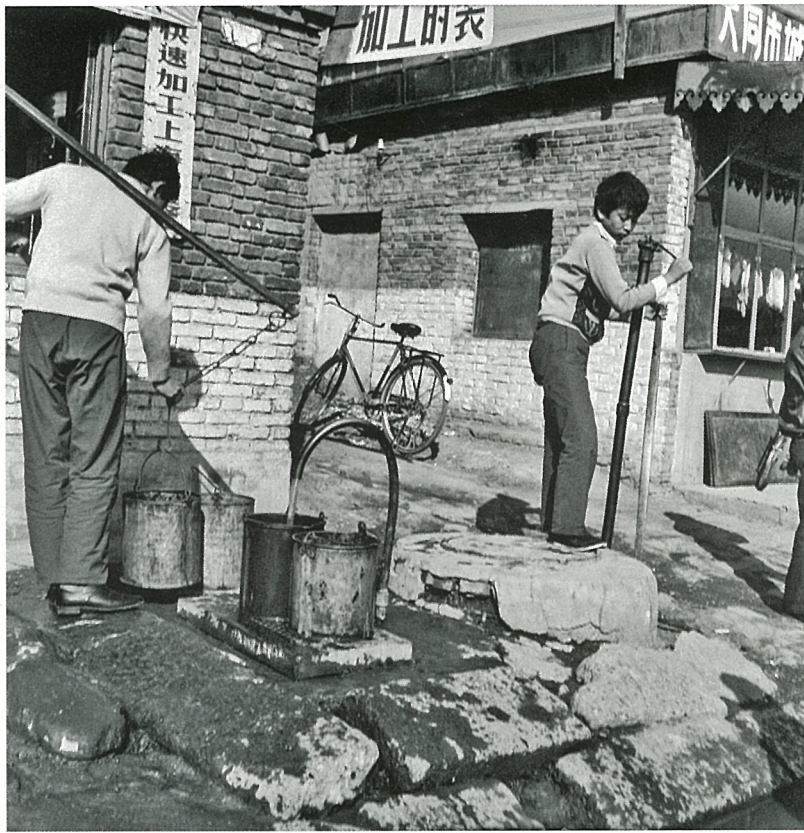
Left: the General Fusion nuclear-fusion demonstration plant, designed by Amanda Levete's firm AL\_A. Below left: Patrick Dransfield's photo *Datong Boys*. Bottom: Dransfield out with his camera in Beijing, 2013

Escaping to the past is one of the more diverting ways to duck the onslaught of news headlines. This issue, however, offers more concrete means to get away. In our property special, Ruth Bloomfield has rounded up the most remote, remarkable and ravishing places on the market, and found boltholes the world over, from Lake Wakatipu in New Zealand to Wyoming's Jackson Hole ("Leap Year", page 44).

But while my instinct when faced with the world's problems is to err towards the flight school of behaviours, thankfully there are others who want to find solutions for our woes. When I met Amanda Levete at a dinner just before we went into lockdown, I was so excited by the sound of all her projects I sent a fan-girl email to her the morning after in the hope that she would share her insights once again. In "Architecture Touches on What it is to be Human" (page 40), the Stirling Prize-winning British architect talks about her plans to house one of the world's first nuclear-fusion facilities for the Canadian clean-energy firm General Fusion, a first residential project – and her early experiments to produce transparent wood.

As with many architects, Amanda asks the question of how a building, or environment, can best serve the people in it. And around it. As a guide for how to spend it well, I can think of few others better placed. ■ HTSI

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# My Beijing spring

A trove of lost photographs, taken by a junior teacher in China in 1986, revisits a country on the brink of social change and a landscape near eclipsed from history

Words and pictures by *Patrick Dransfield*



Recently clearing out my Hong Kong flat as my wife and I are empty nesters (our three children now all in the UK), I came across a large plastic bag filled with negatives, around 50 of them, tightly rolled and wrapped in thin tissue paper. The contents of the bag had not seen the light of day since I pressed the shutter of my camera in the heady summer of 1986, when I lived in Beijing and also travelled by steam locomotive to the city of Datong, Shanxi province, famous for the fourth- and fifth-century Yungang Buddhist caves.

The camera, a 1960s Shanghai-manufactured Seagull, is a replica of the twin-lens periscope camera used by Chicago-based Vivian Maier, who evidently – like me – found satisfaction in simply pressing the shutter on that eternal moment expressed so poetically by the patron saint of street photographers, Mr Cartier-Bresson. Mine was bought with every spare yuan I had from a pawn shop on Wangfujing, Beijing's Oxford Street. It cost Rmb100, a week's wages, earned as a junior teacher at Beijing Shifan Daxue (Beijing Normal University), which specialised in teacher training. The camera did not come with a light meter and had no instructions.

Fortunately, I was young and unattached and time seemed abundant – as did 120 black-and-white film – and darkroom development was cheap. A recent graduate from Leeds University, I had spent the past four months teaching spoken English at Beishida (as the university is

Right: group posing with an imperial turtle stele in Datong. Top left: a young man, Beijing. Above: the local water pump, Datong. Left: poster about bicycle and pedestrian safety





EVEN THEN I KNEW THAT I  
WAS CAPTURING A FLEETING  
TIME, SOON TO BE LOST

known) and working for the *Newsweek* bureau, while staying with a retired Chinese couple in Zhongguancun, the intellectual quarter of north Beijing. The area was later to become the city's Silicon Valley. At that time it had a single telephone, sitting black, majestic and unused on the shelf of the local grocery shop.

For three months I dedicated myself to taking pictures. My daily cycle route consisted of a 30km round trip on my "Shanghai Pigeon" – the Rolls-Royce of bicycles – starting from Beijing Shifan Daxue, then along the second ring road and by the Lama Temple, past the Forbidden City and through the lanes that intersected the *hutongs*, to the diplomatic quarter, where I also earned precious US dollars as a researcher for *Newsweek* correspondents Jim Pringle and Carroll Bogert. (I did get

to speak to Katharine Graham by phone once during her visit to China – but that is another story.) Cycle, stop, click, enjoy the scene, chat (my putonghua, though basic, was comprehensible to Beijingers), cycle and repeat. The day started at 6.30am and included a compulsory two-hour rest period after lunch as a consequence of low energy levels from the meagre diet. The whole city was shut down by 6pm. Steam locomotives were a common sight and donkey traps still made their ambling way along Beijing's main thoroughfare, Jianguomenwai. Even then I knew that I was capturing a fleeting time, soon to be lost.

For me, a picture I call "Datong Boys" expresses a particular moment of liminality. Taken from across the desolate basin of the Shili river directly facing the Yungang Buddhist caves, the boys stand between

child and adulthood. China itself in the hot summer of 1986 was at a liminal moment. Deng Xiaoping was firmly in power, and his prime minister Zhao Ziyang began enthusiastically implementing the Open Door Policy to encourage foreign investment. Even the most brutalised Chinese intellectuals believed that their lives would never again be subjected to the sort of chaos seen in Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution (1966-76). The future for China could only be up.

But already the transformation of the city was beginning. Some areas appeared as a construction site with no end in sight. "China – it will be nice when it's finished" was a constant refrain between foreigners.

People in Beijing were generous to this blond-haired, tall foreigner with his funny camera and avid interest



in ancient sites. But I was also conscious of the claustrophobic nature of Chinese street life. Surveillance in China has always been a fact of everyday life: you cannot escape into anonymity in a country of more than one billion souls.

What I observe today in these pictures but which did not impress me then – the provincial English kid, liberated from the north of England for the first time – was the grinding poverty of Beijing and its surroundings, especially in the mining town of Datong. How wretched

must it have been to be reduced to selling hedgehogs on the street for people to eat? And those spring onions and winter cabbages sprawled across the dusty pavements comprised the staple diet for the vast majority of people back then.

But I see also the communication of human warmth, humour and pride. A joy of being alive in the sunshine. And, as evidenced by the young students seen here, an expression of innate elegance in both their attire and demeanour – without the designer brands, foreign travel and newfound wealth that was to come. And I see a longing for the new accompanied by an almost wilful disregard for the antiquities of the past – as evidenced by the discarded marble turtle steles with inscriptions from the emperor, marble bodhisattvas and ancient

Taoist tiles that I photographed scattered around the grounds of an old temple.

Pre-Covid at any rate, Beijingers remain warm and welcoming, but has material wealth brought greater happiness? It is not for me to say. But I am delighted that my negatives survived 34 years of neglect more or less intact. I treasure my memories of 1986 and am glad that my younger self thought of preserving something of that time. ■HTSI  
Patrick Dransfield's exhibition *Track of Time* can be seen at *The Foreign Correspondents' Club, Hong Kong*, until 31 October, [fcchk.org](http://fcchk.org). He is donating 10 per cent of all sales to the *Children's Cancer Therapy Development Institute*, [cc-tdi.org](http://cc-tdi.org). He lives in Kowloon with his wife Carmen and still takes pictures with vintage cameras using film. The *Seagull camera* resides in a cellar in north London, in need of repair.

Above: pensioners in Beijing's Hutong District, near the Forbidden City. Top left: a young couple, Beijing. Above left: view over Datong. Top right: a barbecue by the bikes on the Beijing Normal University campus. Above right: Datong Boys, the basin of the Shili river