

Preface – by Xiao Chen

Patrick Dransfield is an old friend, a business partner, and also has proved to be a helpful pilot for many Chinese corporate lawyers, including me, as we attempted to integrate into the international business of law. It is only recently, that I have been introduced to another Patrick Dransfield - the writer and photographer - and I consider it a great honor to write down some of my own impressions and musings on this recently discovered Patrick for his book, “Track of Time: Moments of Transition”.

Around 1280, according to the western calendar, a young, Venetian merchant and adventurer, named Marco Polo, travelled across thousands of miles - by ship, on horseback, mule, foot and camel - to finally reach Dadu (now Beijing), capital of Yuan dynasty China. He fastidiously recorded much of what he saw during his seventeen-year stay in Cathay (China), on behalf of his dotting audience back home in Europe. Marco’s record, “The Travels of Marco Polo”, became a best seller in western Europe. “The Travels” remains in print to this day, for the insights that Marco shared proved to be a precious treasury for humanity, providing a window onto the Chinese and Asia world that was largely unknown to his contemporaries in the west. And even for us Chinese! Myself, and many of my contemporaries read “The Travels” in our student days, as Marco provided an eye-witness account as to how our own Motherland looked hundreds of years ago.

Seven hundred years later, in December 1985, another young western man, named Patrick Dransfield, touched down at the airport in Beijing. Patrick became a junior lecturer at Beijing Normal University, and rode his bicycle across the city, speaking his faltering Putonghua (Mandarin) with confidence, and, while holding his Chinese-made camera around his neck, honestly recorded what he saw. The only difference between Marco and our Patrick, as I see it, is that Marco’s “camera” was his quill pen, while Patrick’s “pen” was his own faithful companion, the Shanghai-manufactured Seagull A1 camera.

I recall that my one wish when reading Marco’s “Travels” was that he had been able to use a camera to record what he witnessed. And it dawned on me when looking at the archive of photos from 1986; isn’t Patrick talking with Marco across 700 years? And like Marco, isn’t he continuing the perpetual dialogue between China and the west? And isn’t this dialogue carried on by generation after generation of enthusiastic, thoughtful and energetic young men and women from both China and the west to this day? I believe that Patrick’s work in creating his photographs of Beijing and Datong in 1986 serves as a great example of this dialogue between our cultures.

Thirty-five years separates us from 1986. To me, as I sit with my own pen, it seems, just a beat of the butterfly’s wing, to that time when I was a boisterous Shanghainese boy, accompanying my father to visit Beijing, the nation’s Capital. I remember being so excited about being on the Beijing Underground, so vividly captured by Patrick, that I insisted that we start again, from the beginning. My father, equally excited, readily agreed.

Time is precious. God give you fair time, and the opportunity to use your time on earth, well. Our friend in common, Patrick, spent a portion of his first twenty-five years, exactly like Marco Polo, in China and Asia. I believe you will truly enjoy Patrick’s book. But the book is not, to my mind at any rate, just simply photographs and words. “Track of Time: Moments of Transition” adds up to an authentic record of the lives and stories of our fathers’ and grandfathers’ generations. The book is an authentic and precious witness: a bridge to Time Past. And after all, isn’t Time the preoccupation of all the great poets of humankind, be they Chinese or western, ancient or modern? Witness Eliot and Wang Wei:

“Time present and time past are both perhaps in time future. And time future contained in time past. If all time is eternally present all time is unredeemable.”
T S Eliot (1888-1965)

*“The autumn hill gathers the remaining light,
A flying bird chases after its companion,
The green colour is bright
And brings me into the moment
Like a sunset mist that has no fixed place.”* Wang Wei (699-759)

Patrick, himself, is also an active participant, as well as a recorder, of the modernization of China. We Chinese should thank Patrick for what he recorded for posterity in 1986, and remember who we were, and are.

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Xiao Chen is presently a litigation attorney at Baker McKenzie FenXun. He has kindly reviewed all of the author’s pictures and provided insightful comments to many.

REMNANTS OF OLD BEIJING

Northeast corner tower of the Gu Gong, Beijing

This Ming dynasty tower and the moat that it guards is an iconic monument in Beijing, still popular with newlyweds, both as a backdrop to their nuptials and as a symbol of stability in a changing world. My route home often took these two towers in and evidently the surreal sight of these two young men in their pyjamas tempted me off my bike that September day.

