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THE LIGHT & MIST OF
YUAN YANG
steve chong photography

NARRATIVE / PHOTOGRAPHY : STEVE CHONG

FOREWORD

During the winter of 2007, I was leading a photography group from Malaysia. In the days of the expedition, I discovered that everyone in the group was a very seasoned professional photographer. But there was a long haired gentleman in the group who was behaving suavely, who particularly caught my attention; in terms of composition, choice of camera equipment, shutter speed and aperture, he was so different from the rest.

This passionate and outstanding young man mentioned above was no other than Steve Chong, a photographer who has been cast by the spell of the terraced paddy fields in Yuan Yang, who was regarded as the specialist in winning awards in the international league of salon.

Mr. Chong's tenacity towards photography and his passion for the terraced paddy fields had seen him traveling thousands of miles over the years to Yuan Yang. He had visited Yuan Yang in all four seasons; his hard work had enabled him to create many different compositions.

Mr. Chong's persistence and the quest for photography had set a new course in my life. I can safely say that for every composition Mr. Chong made here, I was next to him with my camera, but then with our different approach and attitude towards art, and from technical points of view, albeit the same scene, I found mine had always been substandard as compared to that of Chong's.

The Chinese have always been regarded as hard working people, but in this regard, this artist friend of mine had taken a step further. There was a case when I was leading a few photographers from Guang Dong and Guang Xi, we resolved to photograph the Long Dragon Banquet in Ha Bo, but we had to stay at the humble peasants' houses and to share their food. The Chinese from the group had shied away; rather than staying with the peasants, they would prefer living in the town situated about 170 kilometers away. But Mr. Chong insisted he would stay; as a result he was able to capture many wonderful photos .

When Mr. Chong showed me the fruit of his hard labor over the years, I was shocked. His craft was of the finest kind, showcasing the spectacular paddy fields, at the same time depicting the life of the local Hani and Yi people. His art had illustrated the paradise like landscape of Yuan Yang. The paddy fields through his camera were stunning; sometimes it looks like the stairway to heaven and other times looks like the dances of a thousand serpents. He has also showcased the battle of life between the people and nature, ultimately bringing the paddy fields to first class fine art while not forgetting to inject his own feelings.

I salute him for his art, to his pure soul and to his noble course in life. It is my wish that with the release of this book, more people will discover Yuan Yang and come forward to share the beauty of this magnificent landscape.

Ma Li Wen
Yuan Yang, China
20-5-2010

PREFACE

My very first impression of the paddy fields came during my geography class in primary school. I can still remember vividly how our teacher made the effort to distinguish the dry and wet paddy rice. He categorically explained the distinction between the crops while not forgetting the cultivation process in countries like Myanmar, Thailand, Philippines and Indonesia. Interestingly, there was not even one image about paddy shown in the reference book. What had been illustrated however, were the various locations where the paddy was sown, and there was no mention at all of the terraced paddy fields in China. How did the terraced paddy fields look like was left entirely to our imaginations.

It was only after I had developed an immense interest in photography, deeply inspired by the book "China" written by a renowned French author, Yann Layman, that finally enabled me to see the images of the terraced paddy fields for the first time in my life. The book cover was an image of the paddy fields illuminated by the reflection of the evening glow. It was so different from a figment of my imagination that had left a profound impact on. My desire of traveling and photographing in Yuan Yang churned up in my heart since then.

In the spring of 2007, my encounter with Yuan Yang finally came, and thus began my quest of photographing the paddy fields.

The first impression was staggering. The boundless paddy fields, sometimes looked like a multitude of silver lines and other times looked like dragon's spines, set off with the reflections of sunlight and the magnificent sea clouds, would make any photographer humble. I fell for this place almost immediately.

What I failed to anticipate was, however, that setting my foot down at Yuan Yang could make such dramatic impact to my photography career. From the acceptance to the Associateship of Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain, to the publication of this book, all had to begin with my very first footstep in Yuan Yang. Perhaps it is just a complicated love of mine towards Yuan Yang.

The ancestors of Hani tribes were great engineers. Using only very simple tools such as the hoe and plough, but aided with tremendous determination, they constructed the spectacular paddy fields on the slopes of the mountains, at the same time, cleverly devised an irrigation system by drawing water from the highland. There is a saying in Yuan Yang, "the higher the mountains, the higher the water." Statistics have shown that the difference between the lowest terraces to the highest was more than 3000 steps, which is about a kilometer apart. It was a mega project taking tens of generations to complete.

There were many mega projects in human history; however, few are still functioning to date. The Great Wall of China no longer serves as a defensive wall, the Pyramid in Egypt is merely a major tourist attraction, it seems only the Du Jiang Yan Dam in Szechuan and Yuan Yang Terraced Paddy Fields are still serving in good purpose to the mankind faithfully.

I thought it must be God who wanted to bestow the hard working farmers in this region by turning the boundless paddy fields into a wonderful palette. His fascinating creation has inspired photographers from all over the world to come painting beautiful pictures with their eyes.

I was lucky enough to have recorded some of these art pieces. It is my wish that through my lens, I am able to express the spirit of the hardworking Hani tribes and their deep respect for the mother nature, and at the same time the art created by both man and God.

Steve Chong
25-4 -2010



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STEVE CHONG

Steve Chong found his niche in conceptual and surrealistic photography, a passion that he pursues fervently. His tireless efforts and photographic eye have earned him international accolades from more than 15 countries, including Austria, America, Germany, Belgium, Sweden, Italy, Luxembourg, France, Portugal, Poland, Romania, Argentina, Malaysia, Spain and Singapore, he has won more than 100 awards to his badge so far.

Chong is also very fond of landscape photography. Since 2006, the phenomenal scenery of Yuan Yang has captivated Chong, and consequently made him a regular in Yuan Yang. Traces of him can be

discovered at various spots in Yuan Yang all through the four seasons. Chong subsequently compiled the images he captured and wrote the accounts about the images which later led to the publication of this book.

With a set of images shot at Yuan Yang, Chong obtained his associateship under visual art from the Royal Photographic Society on the 16, June 2009.

Chong currently is a columnist for a Chinese local daily, Nanyang Siang Bao. He is also the contributor for some of the most widely read photography magazines in Malaysia. His work could also be seen in many media.

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Hani Terraces

Situated in the Southern slopes of the Ai Lao Mountains, the Hani terraced field in Yuan Yang County is located within the longitude 102 ° 27 ' and latitude 20 ° 47'. This spectacular traditional farming landscape is approximately 2198 square kilometers in total land area. It is geographically under the jurisdiction of Hong He (Red River) Hani-Yi Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province.

The highest elevation is about 3000 meters above sea level. Latitude and elevation have important effects on its climate. In Yuan Yang, its vast variation in altitude greatly contributes to the unique tropical, subtropical and temperate climate differences.

Altitude below 1000 meters is where one could experience tropical weather, while elevation ranges from 1000 to 1700 meters above sea level is always shrouded in clouds and mist. And at the elevation of 1700 meters above sea level, the sunlight magic will be a frequent sight within this range.

Given such a unique and diversified climate, Yuan Yang is regarded as “The sky of three heavenly realms.”

The terrace is inclined at 20-30 degrees, some are even inclined at 70 degrees. From the base of the terrace to the top, they are around 3000 steps and the total distance can be more than one kilometer.

The total area of the terraced paddy fields is as large as 13,190 ha. and has a buffer zone of 14810 ha, with a total population of 390,000 people of which Hani, Yi, Thai, Miao, Yao, Zhuang and the other ethnic minorities accounted for 85% of the total population. They still retain their languages, costumes, writings, culture, food, religions and so on.

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CHAPTER I

THE LIGHT

The Art of Timing

The photo on the right carried a rather significant meaning to my expeditions in Yuan Yang, simply because it was the very first photo I captured there. My destiny with Yuan Yang began with this image. From a certain aspect, it has enlightened me in many ways, unfortunately, at the same time, it has also recorded a regrettable moment.

I remember vividly; the location was at Duo Yi Shu, the reflection of the sun had fallen on a very interesting angle: surrounded by layers of mist, the light was trying to break through and had showcased an astounding moment. Miraculously, there was a ring encircling the reflection.

To a photographer, especially one who was regarded as a newbie in Yuan Yang, the moment was absolutely magical. I had to admit, I was rather ambitious during my maiden tour to Yuan Yang. Dying to get good images, I had not only brought along the 135, 6x7 but even the bulky 4x5. I confess I was determined and greedy at the same time. However, dream and reality always go against each other, the bigger they are, the harder they fall.

I was in awe of the moment before me. Struggling to decide which camera to use, eventually, I went for the 4x5. I set it up

hurriedly, composed, focused, metered, inserted the film holder, pulled the dark slide and then fired the shutter. Still I was just not quick enough. Just when I wanted to press the shutter, the ring disappeared before my eyes. It was one of the most painful moments to see something so wondrous slip away. I was totally annoyed, disappointed, and remorseful. In short, it was really a mixed feeling. To avoid further disappointment, I quickly fired a few shots with the 135; then again, the best moment had passed.

I learned a good lesson from this episode; I had no one to blame but myself. On the positive side, it had given me a great enlightenment: be well prepared and always be sensitive to the surroundings, these are the essential qualities one should have especially when photographing at Yuan Yang.

As far as the gears are concerned, it would be wise to have lighter and more flexible equipment. The 120 and 135 are a good choice.

The 4x5 and 8x10 on the other hand are generally slower, because it is hard to predict when the “best” moment is, so the chances of getting a great shot would be relatively lower.

Good timing is pivotal to photography, such as life.



Failing to capture the amazing scene had been a dreadful experience. I had been acting a little nervous after the painful episode. Like “A nervous rat”; as my counterparts had been teasing me. I thought I would rather get a bad shot than not getting any! Seen here are ray beams piercing through the mist. Image was captured 5 years after this unforgettable experience.

DATE: 25 DEC 2007 / PLACE: DUO YI SHU / CAMERA: FILM / FILM: VELVIA 50 / ISO : 50 / A: F8 / S: 1/125s

The First Gift

2nd. December 2007, I returned to Yuan Yang and embarked on my second expedition. Learning from the first experience, I felt a little nervous but at the same time my expectation was higher. I started to realize that it was the place full with opportunities for photography. I must admit that I was just at the beginning of setting sail for landscape photography. And, taking photos of paddy fields and mist is really new to me.

Three days had gone without a trace, just like many enthusiastic fans of photography, first place to go on their pilgrimage was Duo Yi Shu. So did we. I guessed the luck was not on me as there were neither spectacular sea clouds nor fascinating skies in sight, not to mention the much talked about “magical mirror”.

Duo Yi Shu, like any ordinary day, was reluctant to show her charm. What greeted us was a blanket of mist. The situation would easily upset any earnest photographer and tourist, but conditions like these were considered “normal” in Duo Yi Shu. The higher the



The insistent and persuasive Hani girls would not miss any chance to sell their merchandise. “Please would you buy an egg from me uncle?” The phrase is quite common at Duo Yi Shu.

expectation, the more disappointed the photographer will be. The mist showed no sign of subsiding, and I had already photographed too many young Hani kids selling eggs. When my hair and eyebrows became drenched by the mist, I could not help much but give in. So I told myself I would have to come back again the next day.

After lunch, my guide, Master Ma, having studied the weather, suggested that we should not return to the old town, instead we should photograph whatever came along our journey towards Tiger’s Mouth. What he really meant to say was that since the sky was terribly overcast, no matter where we went wouldn’t make much difference. It would be worthless even to try. Tiger’s Mouth obviously was the final fortress of the day. I had no objection to Master Ma’s suggestion. Under such condition, his strategy sounded logical.

After getting in and out of the vehicle a few times and shooting a number of nameless locations, the disappointment grew. I was a little depressed and less enthusiastic. Perhaps it was just after lunch, I could feel lethargy overtaking me. Or maybe I was exhausted due to a long flight and lack of sleep. Just when I thought a nap could do me good, I took a look outside the window. I noticed that the sky was becoming clearer by then, though there was still a thin layer of mist. I could even see the paddy fields in the distance. What amazed me more was the day had come off fine, as if someone had torn a hole through the sky, there were amazing ray beams piercing through and reflecting lights on the watery paddy fields, hence constituted a breathtaking scene.

I was completely mesmerized. Gone was my sleepiness. I shouted: “Look on your right, Jesus light! Stop the car!”

Having heard me shouting, the driver immediately stepped on the brake and awakened Master Ma, who was dozing in the front seat. “Quick! Grab your gears. Let’s get off the bus.” He quickly took a glance and calmly said. I opened the door and darted off.

I could still hear Master Ma shouting, “Quickly, take a few shots;



DATE: 25 DEC 2007 / PLACE: TIGER’S MOUTH / CAMERA: SIGMA SD14 / LENS: SIGMA EX17-70 / ISO : 50 / A: F4.5 / S: 1/500s

The Second Gift

cont'd

we have to go to Tiger's Mouth, the angle there will be better." While I was running, I changed to mid-range lens, and without even setting up the tripod, I just fired away. This was really shooting on the run. I could only take a few shots as Master Ma was shouting loudly: "Come! Let's go to Tiger's Mouth quickly."

Reluctantly I dashed back to the bus, while still kept muttering: "It's actually fine here ..."

Master Ma said confidently, "Trust me Mr. Chong, Tiger's Mouth gives you even better angles."

I wasn't quite convinced though, while looking out of the window, breathlessly, I was overjoyed in fact. I guessed it was the first gift I had got from God's mercy!

When we arrived at Tiger's Mouth, I was glad that I had listened to Master Ma, because what I had experienced next made such a profound impact on my photographic career.

The calm and light winds were blowing steadily on the sky above



Tiger's Mouth, spectacular rolling sea cloud scenery emerged, lingering with light beams shining through in between cracks of the clouds. And suddenly, it transformed into the image on the right, providing a unique visual feast to all of the photographers at Tiger's Mouth. I reckoned, I had just been blessed with my second gift.

While photographing, I told Master Ma: "Sigh, should I have ever doubted you!"

He didn't reply as he too was busy photographing.

The cumulous clouds on the sky kept moving and changing constantly, looking lighter one moment and darker the next, the atmospheric pressure did make a big deal to their position in the sky. Showing no sign of settling down in a piece on the sky, the clouds were alive and on the move!

How could I have ever let such scenes slip away! I kept relishing the spectacular changing clouds while my mind crept through the sky. I kept pressing my shutter, checking the exposure and trying different compositions.

I took my eyes away from the sky a few seconds, and then I saw a completely different pattern covering the sky. A moment ago only rolling clouds hanging in stillness, now as the wind had made them thin against the sky, I spotted a cluster of clouds traveling and converging around the centre of a light beam, forming such an unbelievable gorgeous scene.

The situation didn't improve much after lunch; it was as gloomy as ever. Visibility had sadly narrowed down to only a few feet. Weather like this would make any photographer depressed.



DATE: 12 DEC 2007 / PLACE: TIGER'S MOUTH / CAMERA: SIGMA SD14 / LENS: SIGMA EX17-70 / ISO : 50 / A: F16 / S: 1/40s

The Third Gift

cont'd

Even the hawkers and the local Hani people stopped and were obviously struck by such a fascinating view. Some said: "What a sight, I have never seen this before. It's quite unusual!"

Excitedly, I kept firing away, I couldn't think much, all I could hear was my heartbeat rocking with the changing clouds. I couldn't stop pressing my shutter as if the deceitful clouds would move and change.

It was just few seconds later, the clouds stopped and hanged in stillness over the Tiger-Mouth. Perhaps they had found a great spot to rest their airy tails. Joy filled the air, only the sound of camera clicking could be heard.

The weary clouds finally left and put the sun to nap. The ray beams became dimmer and dimmer.

The whole shooting episode lasted for nearly an hour. Not only was I treated with a great photographic experience but also at the same time it made me see through the endless possibilities of producing great photos in Yuan Yang.

I was indeed overjoyed!

I thanked the All Mighty for showing us His kindness with a feeling of immeasurable joy. He had sent us wonderful gifts, not one but many.

That day was December 25, Christmas Day.



Just when I felt so excited and decided to call it a day, I noticed on the left of the belvedere, the clouds were reflecting the remaining light from the sky. The paddy fields consisted of red, blue, green, orange and a variety of colors, creating an abstract piece of art.

DATE: 25 DEC 2007 / PLACE: TIGER'S MOUTH / CAMERA: SIGMA SD14 / LENS: SIGMA EX17-70 / ISO : 50 / A: F13 / S: 1/40s