

Andreas Seibert. Huai He – The Colors of Growth

The Huai He is one of China's most important rivers. It flows eastwards from Henan province dividing the huge country into a northern and southern half. The river is a vital artery for millions of people, but it also mirrors the flip side of the rapid unchecked growth of the Chinese economy. The cultures and everyday reality in the different provinces may differ significantly, yet the people living along the river are confronted everywhere with the same fact: currently the water of the Huai He resembles a poisonous sewer rather than a life-giving element.

The Swiss photographer Andreas Seibert, who lives in Tokyo, travelled the over 1,000 kilometre-long Huai river from its source to its estuary. Taking the example of the river, he highlights the anxieties and hopes, as well as the daily struggle of the population for survival, forced as they are to come to terms with the fact that – literally – everything is in flux. The work that has resulted is informative, empathetic and startling. The abstract facts take on a sensual aspect in Seibert's photographs, the ambivalence of which is captivating and provocative. May we delight in the river's beguiling play of colours when we know what causes it? And how can we bear the melancholy beauty of the landscapes, settlements and people when the reality is permeated by an unsurpassable desolation?

Peter Pfrunder

Andreas Seibert was born in Switzerland in 1970. He studied German and Philosophy at Zurich University from 1990 to 1992, and photography at the Zurich Hochschule der Künste from 1992 to 1997. He has been working as a free-lance photographer since 1997. He moved to Tokyo in late 1997 and lives there with his family. Andreas Seibert has been documenting China's economic boom since 2002. His photographic projects address and explore the unchecked forces to which the population is being exposed.

Andreas Seibert's works have appeared in leading international publications and been exhibited worldwide. In 2009 his book *From Somewhere to Nowhere – China's Internal Migrants* (Lars Müller Publishers) was among the finalists for the prestigious And/or-Photobook prize. Parallel to the exhibition at the Fotostiftung Schweiz, the book *The Colors of Growth. China's Huai River* will be published by Lars Müller Publishers, Zurich.

All the works in the exhibition are Archival Pigment Ink Prints on Epson Hot Press Natural Paper. The works are for sale; information at the reception desk.

The following exhibition texts were written by the photographer.

Fringe events:

28 October, 11.30 am: tour of the exhibition with Andreas Seibert

5 December, 7.30 pm: *From Somewhere to Nowhere – China's Internal Migrants*. On the road in China with the Swiss photographer Andreas Seibert. A film by Villi Hermann (2009)

8 January 2013, 12.15 to 12.45 pm: Bildfokus / Image in Focus with Sabine Münzenmaier

Public tours of one of the exhibitions at the Fotostiftung Schweiz or Fotomuseum Winterthur: Wednesday, 6.30 pm, Sunday, 11.30 am. For details call info line: 052 234 10 34

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Lost Souls

The high-speed train from Shanghai to Hefei travels through a heavy storm. Flashes of lightning dart from the darkening sky, heavy raindrops knock on the train roof. A short time ago two high-speed trains collided in similar weather conditions on a viaduct near the city of Wenzhou. Carriages were derailed and plummeted into the depths. Forty people died, over 190 were injured. The severely damaged carriages were buried on site, without further examination.

I take up the newspaper again and read: “For many in China, the train wreck has become a symbol of concerns about whether the government is achieving breakneck development without proper heed to people’s life and health. We are all passengers in this high-speedtrain. China, please slow down. If you are too fast, you may leave the souls of your people behind.”

Black River

There is a small canal south of the city of Luohe which the local people call the “black river”. In summer, when it carries more water, you should not get too close to its banks because even the fumes from the polluted river can cause skin rashes.

Mr. Wang, 46, lives close by in a small house. As a child he was able to swim in the river; the water was clear, and there were even fish in it. The pollution began more than twenty years ago and became gradually worse. With time, the local inhabitants realized just how polluted the water was. In the past there were no mosquitoes here, even in summer. Today the mosquitoes are so large that a swarm of them can cover a whole pig. Mr. Wang’s pigs drank the ground water and were taken ill. He had to sell them. He shows me his fields, the empty pigsties and the spring from which he used to draw the ground water. It is overgrown with branches because he has not touched it for years. He would move away from here immediately if he could, but Mr. Wang is poor and has to stay.

Dead Fish

The locals call the Kui the “smelly river”. When the sluice gates upstream are opened, black water flows past their village. You can smell it before you see it. Then dead fish float on the surface of the river.

The inhabitants of the nearby village of Yi Ji say that the situation has greatly improved over the past years. Mr. Wang, the responsible doctor at the small village clinic, contradicts this. He uses statistics and documents to show that the situation has got worse. The river may well have been cleaned up and widened, but upstream in the city of Xuzhou a lot of dirt still finds its way into the river. He estimates that the ground water is poisoned to a depth of about 16 metres within a radius of four to five kilometres around the river.

Whereas measures are being taken to improve the quality of the air and the water in many Chinese cities, increasingly the hinterland, where two-thirds of the Chinese live, is degenerating into the nation’s dumping ground.

Fear

An old man tells me that a lot of people in this area suffer from cancer. He takes me to a village where a particularly large number of the inhabitants are sick. He stays behind at the entrance to the village because he does not want to be seen with me. I meet a woman whose father-in-law died of cancer a month ago. She herself has already had heart surgery.

I ask her if I may photograph the picture of her deceased parents-in-law in a niche in the parlour. She considers my request, hesitates, and says no, she would rather not. For fear of the local authorities she does not wish to draw attention to herself and be associated with the problem of the illnesses in her village.

She takes us to her father-in-law's grave, just outside the village. The ground here has subsided – because of an active coal mine below. When we drive her back to her house, she gets out of the car at the edge of the village. Despite still being weak from her heart operation, she wants to go the rest of the way on foot and alone. She also does not want to be seen with me.

Helplessness

Not far from the village of Dai Qiao, on a lateral canal of the Huai river, is a corn powder factory. The people in the village believe that it is responsible for the pollution of the canal. Mr. Dong breeds ducks, and his rice fields border directly on the canal. He has complained several times to the local authorities, has gone there in person and has written letters. He was not listened to and received no replies to his letters. Then Mr. Dong was invited to a dinner by the factory owners. In the course of the evening, it was brought home to him clearly that he should not make any more complaints.

As the local school can only offer its pupils dirty water, those parents who could afford it have sent their children to school in the next town. Formerly the school had a thousand pupils, now there are only three hundred. The school reported the problem to the responsible offices, whereupon the authorities also prohibited the school from making any more complaints.

Resettled

A village on the Hongze, one of China's largest fresh water lakes, fed by the Huai He. Soon the village will have been completely demolished and the inhabitants resettled. A young man is cooking a meal in front of a ruined house. When he sees me, he calls to a somewhat older man. The latter comes out of the house, runs towards me and then back into the house. He brings out a Chinese flag, then another, and another. He becomes more and more agitated, brings out a red scarf, then a bunch of plastic flowers. We sit down on small wooden stools and he starts to talk to me, insistently. All the village inhabitants are gone, only Mr. Pan stayed behind with his 78-year-old mother and his son. He cannot afford a new apartment. He is so poor that his wife even left him.

When he has finished talking, Mr. Pan smiles, embarrassed, and thanks me. Meantime his son has written words of protest on a white banner, knocking over the ink as he was doing so. Cursing, he tries to wipe the spot off the banner but only makes it larger. When I get up, Mr. Pan falls down on his knees in front of me.

State Power

The inhabitants of the small village have retreated from the cold wind into their houses. There is almost no one to be seen in the narrow laneways.

Suddenly a police car drives up. One of the two men scrutinizes me and then speaks into the radio device attached to his shoulder. They were obviously looking for me. They get out of the car and ask me to come along with them. We walk into the police station nearby. I am led into a big room. On one wall there are paintings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, opposite them are portraits of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. The table is decorated with plastic flowers. We drink hot water from paper cups.

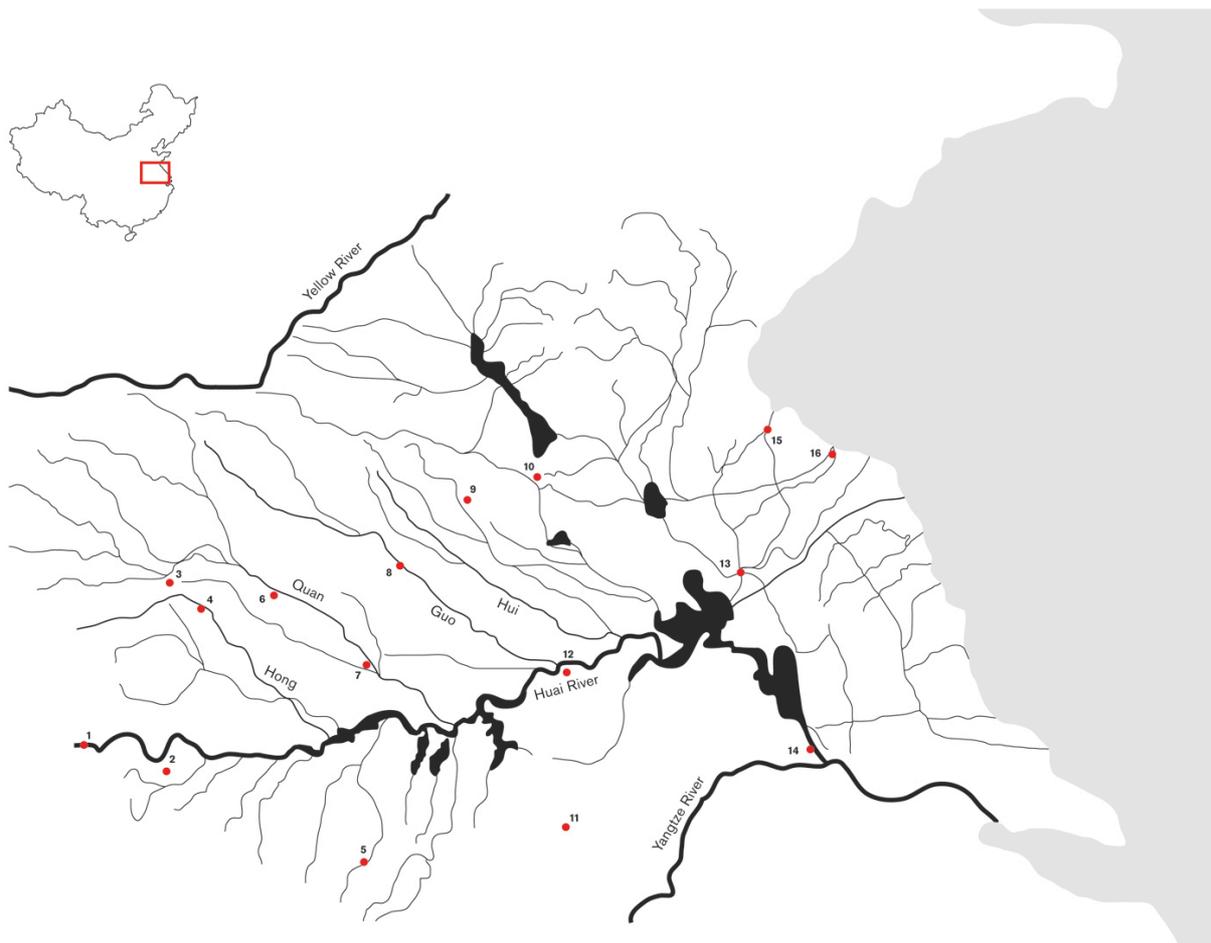
After a short while the police chief appears. Four men and one woman are now seated opposite me. The woman speaks English and checks whether my translator is translating my answers to their questions correctly. What am I doing here, where do I come from, what is my profession, where did I get to know my translator. The tone is polite but probing. A half an hour later I am allowed to go. The policemen accompany me for some time in two cars, one in front of me and one behind.

Against Nature

In the course of Chinese history, one government after another has stated its aim to bring the Huai river under control. The history books tell of countless floods during which thousands of people were drowned and millions made homeless. Irrespective of all the previous failures, in the 1950s the Communist leaders also decided to finally tame the Huai. In the middle of a flooding disaster, Mao Zedong commissioned a gigantic project: the construction of canals, dams and reservoirs. By the mid-1970s a complex water-control system was installed.

In 1975, however, the typhoon Nina caused great devastation: the huge dams broke and many smaller dams also collapsed as a result. A 30-metre-high flood wave swept over the densely populated flatland. In the Henan province 25,000 people died, in the neighbouring Anhui province a million houses were damaged. According to some sources, about 170,000 people died as a result of that flooding catastrophe. Currently the waters of the Huai river are controlled and channelled by more than 5,000 dams and reservoirs. Many of them are in a deplorable state and need to be urgently refurbished.

Translation: Pauline Cumbers



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- 1 Tongbai Mountains, Henan Province (source)
- 2 Xinyang, Henan Province
- 3 Luohe, Henan Province
- 4 Xiangcheng, Henan Province
- 5 Jinzhai, Anhui Province
- 6 Jieshou, Anhui Province
- 7 Fuyang, Anhui Province
- 8 Guoyang, Anhui Province
- 9 Suzhou, Anhui Province

- 10 Xuzhou, Jiangsu Province
- 11 Hefei, Anhui Province
- 12 Bengbu, Anhui Province
- 13 Huai'an, Jiangsu Province
- 14 Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province (Yangtze River confluence)
- 15 Lianyungang, Jiangsu Province
- 16 Yellow Sea, Jiangsu Province (estuary)