

## Foreword: Photos of Skyborne Earthscapes— Chan-fai's *Kairos*

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Chan-fai Cheung's time at the university reminds me of the first sentence of Kant's "Transcendental Aesthetics", the idealistic theory of experience in his great work *Critique of Pure Reason*. The towering German philosopher states there in his typically complicated language that visual perception (*Anschauung*, literally "looking at") is both the unmediated beginning of cognition and the proper end of all thinking, its true aim. Chan-fai started his years at the university as a student of architecture, a visual art. Soon he turned to philosophy, the most demanding discipline of thought. Now, towards the end of his academic career he returns to a visual art—photography.

His chosen field of specialty in philosophy is phenomenology. Phenomenology tries to describe things as they show themselves to an unprejudiced human eye and mind. A phenomenologist is interested in neither how things should be apprehended from a scientific point of view nor how they might best be arranged to serve a practical purpose. He looks at a section of the earth, not as a geographer who plans to render all measureable aspects of it as accurately as possible, nor as a traffic engineer who aims to present it in a way most suitable for a driver or a pilot to swiftly navigate through or over it. These are, of course, useful and honourable undertakings. A phenomenological philosopher tries to see it more like an artist who paints it. For a painter a section of the surface of the earth is not an *area* but a *landscape*. Chan-fai appropriately calls his photos of wide expanses of the earth from far above *earthscapes*.

Landscape painters and earthscape photographers depict more than the objective, physical aspects of an area. They succeed to convey to us an area's subjectively experienced effects. They surprise us by capturing what we humans experience as beautiful, sublime, fascinating, charming, or dreadful, repulsive, shocking, and the like. To grasp and evaluate the difference, compare Google satellite photos with Chan-fai's photos! The Google photos can also look picturesque but they present all areas in more or less the same standard daylight. You never see any clouds, any mist or anything mystifying. Their producers are not eager for special effects thanks to a particular

or even a unique atmospherical event that would be the delight of an artist-photographer. On the contrary, they avoid them and, if unavoidable, eliminate them afterwards. There is no dawning or twilight at the horizon, no night view of a mountain range or of an urban agglomeration on Google maps. There is no subtle sense to savour.

Chan-fai, we can appreciate soon, is not an ordinary phenomenologically trained photographer. His brand of phenomenology is marked by its affinity with existential philosophy. Existential philosophers are sensitive to the right time of a decision. Life is finite and the right moment an instant only. The Greek word for the right moment is *kairos*, made famous both by an aphorism of Hippocrates the physician ("life is short, the right moment acute": *ho bios brachys, ho de kairos oxys*) and the time conscious Bible. Chan-fai has fittingly chosen this term for his first volume of photos in 2009. The *kairos* of a photographer is rarely a deliberately grasped one. It is more the sudden result of his talent and decade-long training. A photographer usually feels urged "as of itself" to make dozens of snapshots of the same sight hastily one after the other. Only afterwards when he looks at his pictures he hits upon the one unique shot from the right angle at the right instant.

Chan-fai is a phenomenologist with a background in Chinese culture. Chinese landscape painters are rightly famous for their rendering of the "spirit" of the land they were painting. When they saw European paintings for the first time they were astonished about their "verismo", their dedication to allegedly "true" depictions of trees, meadows, rivers and mountains. Their plain realism did not correspond to the Chinese perception of things. Chan-fai's earthscapes remind me of an inscription of the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1735–1796) on the landscape painting *Early Spring*, a masterpiece by the famous Song dynasty artist Guo Xi (c. 1023–1085): "No need for willow and peach trees to embellish the space, / in spring mountains, morning sees *qi* rising like steam." The literal as well as the metaphorical and philosophical use of the Chinese word *qi* is comparable to many of the multifarious

meanings of the word “spirit” in European languages. There is no need for any trees at all to embellish Chan-fai’s earthscapes. There are just two or three more traditional landscape photos on which we clearly see individual trees. On a couple of others slender wind turbines and pylons are their present-day substitutions. These pictures are the exception that confirms us the dominant impression of his photos.

Chan-fai is a modern phenomenological photographer. Contemplating on his earthscapes I was stimulated to look for the works of art of recent painters like Francis Bacon and Jackson Pollock. I got curious to see to which of them Chan-fai’s photos resembled most. Many geometrically shaped fields made me think of cubist paintings, those in brilliant colours, the blue ones especially, of Henri Matisse. What induces what? Does our present-day experience of nature inspire our most sensitive painters how to shape what they are painting? Or *vice versa*, do the paintings of these artists subliminally inform our eyes how to see our environment? Pollock’s style is called “abstract expressionism”. “Natural abstract expressionism” is a title that can aptly be applied to many of Chan-fai’s earthscapes. The phenomenologist Bernhard Waldenfels described Chan-fai’s photos of the earth “30,000 feet from above” as “discovering earth structures”. Mountain ranges and rivers that structure the earth dominate many of his photos, but so are man-made fields. Broad roads and highways run through the countryside, dividing it as much as rivers do. The earth of our times is no longer pure nature, no longer just “mountain(s) and water(s)”—or *shanshui*, as the Chinese binomial term for “landscape” reads—that European sinophilic philosophers like to emphasize so much.

I wonder if not another venerable Chinese binomial expression could be adapted to Chan-fai’s earthscapes, namely *tiandi*, “heaven/sky and earth”—obviously not in its classic sense as designation of the world, the universe as a whole, and not because on several of Chan-fai’s aerial photos wide expanses of sky are shown. I am thinking of something different. Traditional landscapes in East and West are shown from standpoints on the earth, whereas aerial photos are taken from somewhere in the sky. The sky (*tian*) is given in them as sign

theorists would say indexically as the location from where the earth (*di*) is presented pictorially. A pictured landscape implicitly indicates the place from where it is perceived. One speaks of airborne landscapes. One can as well speak of skyborne earthscapes.

Let us keep in mind that it is only a few decades since we are capable of seeing the earth ten kilometers from above out of the windows of an airplane. For the first time in the long history of humanity gifted artists can lay out the structures of the earth for us from such a height. We used to call views from above on a landscape “bird’s eye views”. But no bird can fly ten kilometers above the earth and see what we nowadays are able to see.

Until recently artistic earthscape pictures from such heights were mainly the work of European and American photographers. The time has come for Chinese photographers grown up in their *qi*-sensitive tradition of landscape painting to join them. Chan-fai has seized this *kairos*. We gratulate him and felicitate ourselves for his eye views.

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