

in a strange land

# CHINA

A TRIP DRAWN

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Last summer I received an email in which a young woman, a Cadiz artist based in Madrid, who expressed her interest in participating in our section, “In a Foreign Land”. She told me in a few words that she had traveled through various Chinese provinces gathering information (drawings, sketches, and writings) and with them had since returned to her studio to develop a pictorial work about the landscape of those lands.

After the summer holidays, we met at my office and she showed me an elaborate dossier, very well prepared and exquisitely presented, from which anybody could get an idea of the scope and volume of work that this artist had developed. There were lots of quick notes in colored pencils, drawings, photographs, texts; valuable and delicate material of which I, without any doubt, immediately saw the immense possibilities that it contained, and was my proposal for this section

of the next issue of the magazine. When I spoke of this project in the Editorial Board meeting, it was virtually unanimously approved. We had to get to work and start preparations as soon as possible. I soon received new material, photographs that I had not seen before, and images of her works already in exhibitions. We agreed that I would do an interview, but when I saw her answers, I knew what I could have contributed had already been written.

So, I have no more to say... The following is the wonderful, fantastic, and exciting journey in China of a Cadiz artist who, one day, decided to get her suitcase ready and travel many kilometers in many ways to immerse herself in another reality, another culture, in other people. From RVDV, we present you with just a small sample of her work.



**Tell us a little bit about some characteristics of you trip to China: dates, places visited, kilometers travelled, some stories...**

My stay in China was a part of a series of projects that have as common denominators; the trip, getting to know a country in depth, and expressing it through painting. I have two objectives: draw everything that appeals to me – they are drawn trips! – and approach people in a way that permeates my medium and enriches me at all levels as a person.

The trip was in autumn, at the very beginning of winter, when nature takes on a special force. I was in Beijing first, getting to know the city and learning how to deal with it. Every society is organized according to a logic that is not the same anywhere else. In the capital, there are more resources to use when dealing with difficulties. Starting a long trip in isolated or rural places, or between minority cultures, requires training. However, not knowing Mandarin was never a drawback, never an inconvenience. Everything (or almost everything) was more difficult, but at the same time it allowed me to quickly encounter the virtues of the people.

After this period of familiarization (in Beijing), I headed south through eastern regions, then returned to the north through western regions. The provinces I visited were: Shandong, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, Hunan, Qian don, Guangxi, Yunnan, Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu and Shanxi. It

was a small taste of different realities. And, more than 11,000 km! Taking a look at the route on the map excited me. During all those kilometers, there were plenty of people who did much for me.

Throughout the stay, I was drawing, writing, and taking photographs. I sent 17 letters



myself, and then, by squeezing, to get something with so much substance...

The Chinese people are noble, loving, and have an inner goodness that truly moves you. Sometimes, differences in manners, or simply a lack of knowledge of their language or an apparent abruptness, can



> Maps of the initial planned route from Beijing and the route finally conducted.

in which I describe what happened every day. While working in the street, I was in a privileged position. I saw many things, I was very close to the people, and was in the permanent state of analysis, synthesis, and abstraction – so essential to drawing – which permeated me. My dream and my goal was this, to saturate, to immerse

blind and confuse us. But if you look carefully and get close to them, if we approach them calmly, if we learn to love them, a treasure is uncovered.

1.- (m): Meters above sea level.

I have lots of stories! I remember with special fondness of how I lived on the roads to Ganzi (3,300 m)<sup>1</sup>, a small Tibetan town that is sheltered by Mount Chola (6,168 m). There, something happened to me that speaks of the sensitivity of these people...

I arrived by bus. The routes were hellish, dirt and gravel and dust was coming mercilessly through the cracks of the vehicle. Dust was on everything and choking. Journeys lasted for 12 or 14 hours, and would destroy the body. You're constantly bouncing on hard seats; you suffer from altitude sickness, etc. Finally, fatigue sets in. Those sections of the road put my strength to test. However, the landscapes from the road are incomparable; majestic mountains, meadows dotted with yaks, frozen lakes, the architecture, etc. I was amazed!

In the vicinity of Ganzi, I saw absolutely beautiful things and wanted to return there to draw. The best way to go was by foot, despite the dust.

Returning that afternoon, I noticed the presence of a couple of small children who looked at me with the curiosity and timidity of those regions, and with the innocence and wonder of some children who have probably seen few foreigners (or even none).

I stopped, and pretended as if I were drawing. I knew that if I looked at them it would intimidate them, but that they would come to watch me if I started to



draw. And that's what happened. They wanted to see what I was doing. They wanted to touch my clothes, my hair, and my hands. Everything was different to them. They wanted me to take photos of them, and happily posed before the camera.

Suddenly, I saw appearing in the distance through the camera, a third child. He was out of breath and hoped to arrive in time to take part in the portrait. The sequence of photos shows how the little boy drew closer. And, when the three were all together, their grandmother appeared with a comb for the boys and a jacket for girl so as to make her grandchildren quite proper and elegant.

They were beautiful children, but living in extreme poverty. That scene moved me. Despite the shortage, this hard-working lady had not lost decorum and coquetry, and so wanted to tidy them up and comb their hair. But, their hair would not comb! And the new cardigan was just as dirty as the previous one!

The scene took place in silence, and I had time to reflect on the value of it. That was the essence of the journey: be kind to, and play with people; embrace them! Learn to love them.

**Why China? How did the idea of going there to carry out a project like this come to you?**

My process for choosing a destination takes a long time. In addition to deciding



where to go, it's a time in which the idea of a new journey matures and strengthens both the project and my will. This process creates a mood that won't collapse easily, nor will difficulties intimidate me.

I look at a map of the world to sort out ideas. I look at lots of pictures, and read. Scenery, culture, history, and traditions are determinants. It is important to have an extensive public transportation network; and I think about, of course, the budget. It is not easy to find financing for a project involving a portable workshop. Institutions feel more at ease if you continue working at a fixed location, and if it involves travel, that it is moderate. My travel schedule can be thought of, wrongly, as leisure, not work, or misunderstood as a romantic journey. And so, with the map and all these concerns in mind, I begin to discard and select. In a similar approach, Russia came before China. The beauty seen in the regions of Eastern Siberia left me with wanting more.

I wanted to know the reality of the artistic scenery of Beijing and Shanghai from a professional point of view. And I was interested in studying how some important aspects of my painting would take shape in the landscape of China: the silence, color, atmosphere, the contained expression, forms of architecture, and the structures in nature, which in the East, have evolved differently than in Europe. I work with a profound dialogue with nature, the Chinese culture, which from its origins has created a very strong communion with the landscape. I wanted to immerse myself into the scenery of the culture.

**And so, now you are in China... Why did you choose that particular route? On what criteria did you choose your destinations and where you would stop to take notes?**

**Did you, at any time, ever think of shortening the trip, withdrawing from any part or simply stop drawing and writing and limit yourself to traveling and enjoyment?**

When I started studying about China, I found out that what I was interested in, from an artistic point of view, was to draw it: the paradigmatic gardens of this civilization, the mountains – which have an unusual outline – and the exuberant subtropics, the deserts in some regions, or regions where traditions of the past remain... I first let myself be seduced by an image or a story. I locate it on a map, and I get underway. Difficulties didn't frighten me or the adversity of the climate, nor do I like hearing about that something is difficult or impossible, and therefore not worth doing. My travelling instinct quickly transforms this discouragement into an incentive.

I think that itineraries are built on an intuitive basis and on perception: I see an image, or read a text, and intuit that it will interest me. Intuition is powered, is exercised, and is accompanied by a strong will; not surrendering until what has intuitively seduced you, is reached. All of this is done without abandoning good and common sense. On these types of trips, the key is not to lose the mood, to be very disciplined, not to fall into the temptation of being comfortable, and persevere.

In China, I went through a very special route which was one of the best of all experiences. And it was thanks to something I read:



“Those who want to do the land route to Sichuan have ahead a six-day journey at high-altitudes; you will need warm clothes and much courage. [...]

North of Shangri-La is where green tea is converted into butter tea, where Confu-

passage of trucks have ruined them. Tourist facilities are limited and, from autumn until spring, everything is closed. The region has more than 200 days a year below freezing temperatures, electrical power outages are frequent for many villages, altitude sickness can cause changes that require

as well as the interesting villages that are passed through. This route, I read, tests the integrity of anyone who dares to cross it.” (Letter XIV: A Gold Mine)

This type of description fueled my desire for discovery, and so, I combined both routes,

Several days in a narrow and crowded train favors meeting and being with them in close quarters. We had much time to talk, slowly, with a dictionary, drawings, and expressions that are nothing but signs of respect, admiration, and affection – the language of all humanity.



cianism gives way to Buddhism, and the soft hills become sharp, snow-capped peaks that reach toward the sky.

The road runs between 4,000 and 5,000 meters above sea level, and is one of the highest, most difficult and dangerous roads in the world – and also, one of the most beautiful, if not, the most. Many parts of the road, the majority, really, are not complete, and the climate and the constant

medical attention, [...] and food is scarce in some villages.

The possibilities of routes on this side of the border, that is, in the areas that do not belong to Tibet, are two: south and north. The northern route is somewhat longer and the roads, though they seem impossible, are worse. However, they cross proud mountain passes, such as the Chola Mountain pass, and the views are extraordinary,

and never wanted to turn back. But there was a very important part of the itinerary that came during the evolution of the trip: the contributions of the people who I met! When the map was spread out on the tables in the train, all my fellow Chinese travelers came to look, pointing excitedly, giving advice. The routes, in themselves, are the cornerstones, are the soul of the trip! They are the long periods of coexistence with people.

I left Beijing with a basic plan. When I arrived at a place, I would start working immediately. By working, I would see possibilities for the location, and would decide how long to stay. The abundance of public transport and the simplicity of accommodations allowed for improvisation.

Sometimes I had to dwell at a site, if only to write or to sort drawings and photographs that accompanied each letter, to study





the route, and to think. They were many things to do at the same time! It was a working trip, with very specific targets, and with a very specific requirement. But, this de-mand was to be in a fair measure so as not to damage my mood, or my will. After all, no one was going to rescue me...

**I understand your project as multifaceted, covering various technical disciplines, such as painting, drawing, photography and even letters. Are they all really needed? Does each provide a different view, or do they come together to provide a unified point of view? Do you think that you could have dispensed with any, or some, of them?**

I am a painter, so I always work for the painting! But, in reference to the discipline, you can't think exclusively of the art being represented in two dimensions in the strict sense. It's much more! It is a concept that includes a mode of perceiving, contemplation, studying, and evaluating each idea. The tools for working can be many. Each has potentials that the others don't have. For projects on a journey like this, all are needed, and eliminating any of them would be due to a lack of means, never by choice.

I could not travel without sending letters. By writing, I order my thinking and my journey. To express myself, I have an order in my head, and internal order. On the other hand, I do almost all my writing as an examination of conscience. I can't send letters to speak ill of a country – that, never! Every writing makes the will learn and love the

people and to reconcile itself when with things do not go well. Ultimately, I re-read the letters and this invigorates my emotions which favors working in the studio. I do not know if this material will ever see the light of day, but I'm sure that it complements the drawings and photographs.

In China, writing was a difficult undertaking. My accommodations were very austere, and, on occasions, in rooms with neither tables nor chairs. The constant din of this joyous population, doesn't favor seeking serenity. No one would believe it: sometimes I got up early in the morning and went to a fire escape, trying to find silence, so I could write with some consistency. It seemed crazy... But I didn't want to give up. I needed to write about many extraordinary things.

Drawing is inherent to painting. My working method is a tool for study and reflection. Moreover, since it is performed in nature, it reflects every moment, all the circumstances of the trip. The icy wind and rain, the quiet, the fatigue and joys are felt. Sketches are the interpretation of certain emotions, my intimate conversations with Nature.

The photographs (almost) have a documentary character, and can be perceived as having been taken by a painter, and are not an end in themselves. I do not use them to paint, but to evoke. The letters are composed with photographs and drawings: we could say that they are the expression of an experience that takes form with the



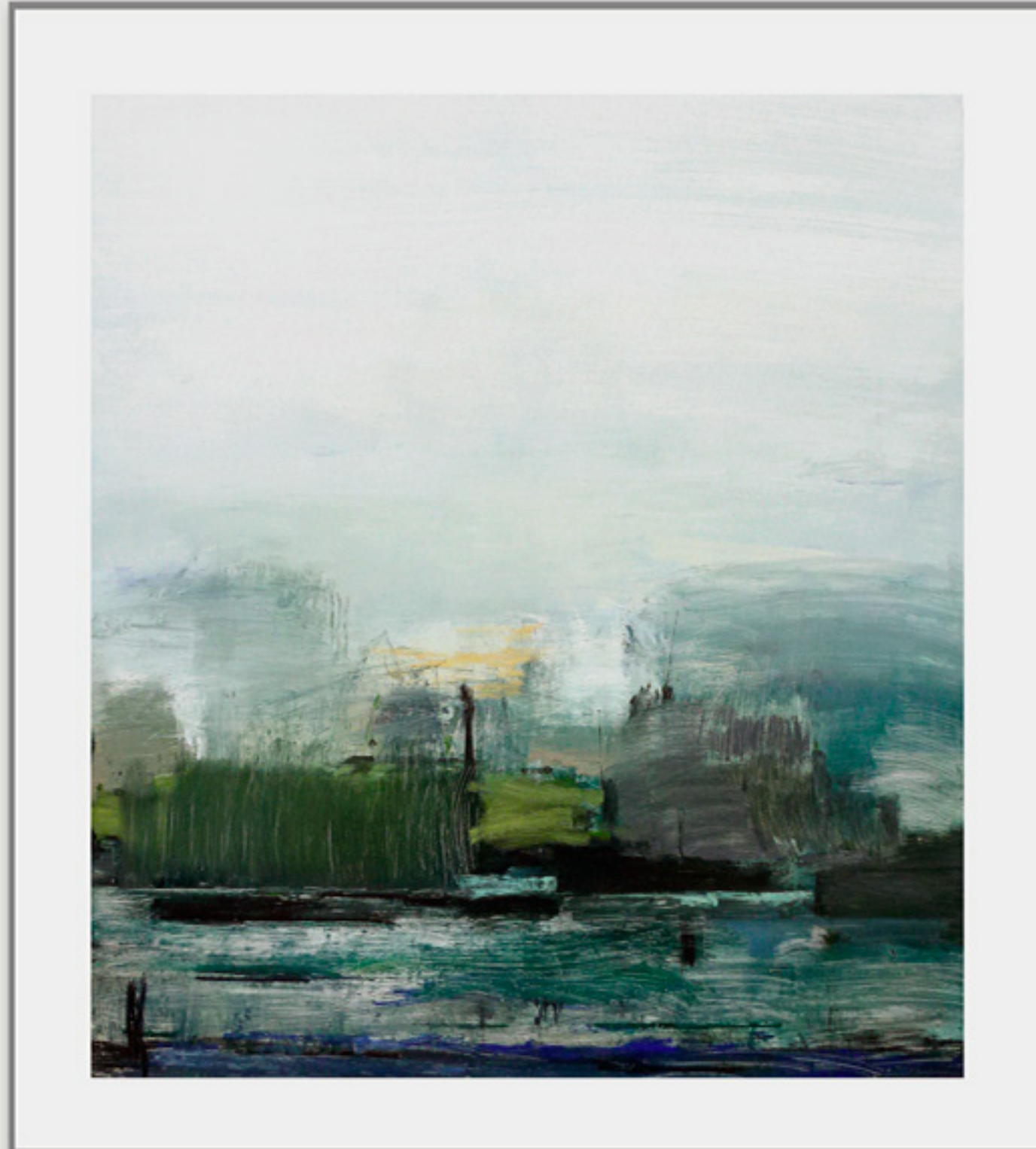
word, the documentary image, and with a drawn interpretation.

### **Tell us a bit about the working process throughout the project...**

The project itself had three periods: the months spent in China, the first thoughts as they were translated into painting (in the studio), and paintings which were the result of a second discernment, that is, when with the passage of time, it matures the experience and when the actual piece also evolves to the very essence, trying to express those things which, through its transcendence can't be said with ordinary language, nor needing superfluous explanations. The process, therefore, varies according to each period.

In China, I drew every day. I had to study the themes typical of the region where I was and interpret its essence and the concepts that underlie every reality, and to then record them in sketches. In conceptual terms of my work, this translates into color, shapes, structures, the atmosphere, etc. And, I work from the analyses, syntheses, and abstractions. The method of work was always the same, but the requirements for each drawing varied according to the changing dictates of Nature. My analyses continued wherever I was staying by drafting and finalizing letters. The task of drafting and writing them helped me simplify and understand what was essential for each place. Sometimes circumstances altered the method, the order, the process...

In the last portion of the Trans-Tibetan route, I stopped in villages whose isolation



left a remarkable imprint on the environmental aspect and the character of the inhabitants. Serxu (4,200 m) is an idyllic place where nature rejoices by spreading beauty everywhere. They live surrounded by a freezing atmosphere during which, at twilight, cold air particles are reflected like iridescent glass and the turquoise color of the ice crackles in the meadows that surround the city. The streets are gripped by low temperatures, the dogs have an agonized appearance, the few stores that there are have little to offer. In this city I worked happily, enraptured with the light and the meadows, but (meanwhile) making a tremendous effort to come to terms with the maxim: "Never expect that the country we visit makes us comfortable, because we have to understand that it is made for convenience of its inhabitants which do not necessarily coincide with ours." And even so, Serxu appeared to me as bereft with the minimum that is required by any human being for survival.

With the emotional burden of the experiences of Serxu, I arrived at Yushu (4,000 m) in the so-called "Chinese Siberia." I walked through streets, between rubble, dust, and tents. Tents functioned as stores, and piles of debris were used to exhibit products on sale. "What happened?" I asked myself. I didn't understand what all that was. As someone who had seen a mirage, I went back to my guidebook and began to read: "Yushu, one of the farthest corners in one of the remotest provinces of China; dotted with impressive monasteries [...]. The few foreigners who come here can enjoy some astonishing roads, [...]."







I chose at random one of the recommended accommodations, and showed it to someone who happened to be at my side. They did not understand Chinese, only Tibetan. I tried several times and they always answered me the same: impossible. When they repeatedly told me impossible, I started to suspect something. In addition, I had not found even one named street. As on other situations like this, I put my backpack on the floor and I stopped to think.

In Yushu on April 14, 2010 there had been an earthquake! My guidebook was an earlier edition and therefore descriptions did not coincide with the reality that was in front of me. Residents in Yushu had suffered greatly, and I knew they were making an immense effort to keep going. Their day-to-day existence wasn't at all easy. I didn't know of that earthquake, or had forgotten about it completely, hence my surprise, my expectation and confusion during the early hours. It had neither impressive monasteries as stated in the guide, nor hotels, or anything... only people... who wanted to take care of me.

How could you draw the soul of these devastated people? How did I express the friendly and warm faces – despite their anguish – of all who looked at me so perplexed? How did my art interpret their fear, or the dimensions of their affection towards me? That day, for example, it was impossible to draw. In the evening, in a tent, I drew a few sketches that suggest all this – from abstraction and with absolute honesty.

The other two periods of the project have been, and are now taking place here in Spain, and are, indeed, more at ease or are involved at a different emotional level with certain restlessness. Intellectually, they have the same magnitude, but are accompanied by different emotions. At first, I thought a lot about what I had lived there while having sketches nearby and all the material that I had brought with me, painting in larger formats, and calmly studying the subject-matter but with sketches and written descriptions present.

The present and final period is an interpretation in which the painting is autonomous and independent of the reference from which it came. It is an abstraction with a very specific identity of its own... It's an abstraction that seeks to speak and express something lived, studied, and drawn; an abstraction of that part of reality, or a concept of this reality, which, in itself, is abstract. This exercise involved, each day, as if it were physical training, returning to analysis to permanently nurture such abstraction.

**Can you comment about the two periods, or stages of your work: one, being on location, and second, afterwards and when working more calmly and back in your studio? What does each one do to the whole? And, which of them do you enjoy most?**

The project rests on two foundations: the work in nature, and the work in the studio. Each brings elements that are used in a reciprocal manner and contribute to the final work. Both are important from the



intellectual and personal perspective. As a painter, challenging myself with things and staining my boots with mud in unknown lands is important and exciting. However, drawing and studying when protected from these emotions is a great pleasure. As a painter, I need and enjoy the workshop; working in silence, with calmness and listening to the echoes of having lived the experience. Field work makes the emotions tangible, full of strength and vigor. It provides knowledge, both hardens and sensitizes, and trains them. In China, some days I would return to my lodging desolated, with the feeling of not being capable of doing anything. I constantly asked myself how I could reduce to simple annotations those essential concepts of the nature of each region. This is a difficulty that is intrinsic to painting, to drawing, to my discipline. This is the intellectual exercise (not just manual) that maintains it: analyze, synthesize, and abstract so as to be able to express. As the old man said in *The Unknown Masterpiece*, "The mission of art is not to copy nature, but to express it! You are not a vile copyist, but a poet!"

Working in the studio matures and induces reflection. It lets the source of each experience order itself. Conversations with the subject are rigorous, and a trusted relationship with the easel seasons the project. The synthesis that the artist seeks establishes a fruitful dialogue with the painting through humility (as one who admits being recognized as small when compared with the magnitude of Nature), and gratitude.



**We know that you chose remote, deserted, and almost unpopulated areas... Was this for any particular reason? Might there be another different project focused precisely on the areas of highest population density?**

It is very difficult to find unpopulated places in China. There are truly many, many people! During my stay, I traveled to different regions in respect to the number of inhabitants, level of development, climate, tradition, etc. I am interested in where China is in all this in its totality, as a sum of many provinces with very different characteristics and influences.

Professionally, I need a large metropolis boiling with cultural life. In Beijing I could engage in dialogue with fellow painters, visit studios of artists, exhibition halls, and teach classes at the University. I met cosmopolitan Chinese people and got to know the cultural atmosphere of the city. But China is much more than Beijing. I needed to look for other places that are also the present reality of the country. There are still places where you can hear the silence, and where people live in diametrically different ways. Large cities were

close to me because of their affinity with the West. However, walking in the Gobi desert, driving around the provincial roads in Tibet, travelling two days in a sleeper-coach to over 5,000 meters above sea level really made strong emotional impressions. It really hit me inside! The people, the scenery, the atmosphere... I believe that by looking closely at Nature, it opens the eyes wide, runs through all dimensions of a person; it is truly uplifting.

The overwhelming feeling that I experienced in Daocheng (3,753 m) is vivid. The presence of silence, the emptiness, the expressions of its inhabitants, the absence of life, cold, the forcefulness of the sun... All this was impressive. When I walked through those places, the most insignificant sound had an outstanding power in contrast to the silence. There, truly, Man becomes aware of his scale with Creation.

I was led to this city on the recommendation of the English writer Lily Hyde, whom I had met in Shaxi, a village on the Tea Route. She said Daocheng was difficult to access, and that it was precisely because

of its isolation that it had developed as an exquisite and uncontaminated place. She was right. But even there, in a seemingly deserted region, I had the experience of sharing a day's work with a girl who was fascinated with my presence, my backpack and pencils...

**Finally, let's talk about the future... Is there going to be an extension to this project? A second trip to China? Perhaps explore new territories?**

I haven't been back to any other prior destinations, but in China I still have many things to see. I promised myself while in some of those places, that I would return. I hope that's possible. I would like to visit Mongolia. I discovered its beauty when I was in Russia – from the other side of the border, but I have not been to it, yet. The light I saw from Ulán Udé, left my retinas hypnotized. I remember the letter I wrote from there was titled, "Ulán Udé: A Place in the World".

I have many projects and many candidate countries. The common denominator is the dream to meet and cherish other people, learn to love them - as I said be-

fore - and the will to recall them through that combination of drawing, painting, photography and letters. The art disciplines make tangible the secrets of Life, and can express things of great importance.

Pliny the Elder said something that motivates me: "By nature, men like to see new things and travel." And, Oriental teachers say: "I use the mountains as a pillow and the vast sky as a blanket." Both reflections refer to the journey, which for me is, without a doubt, a means of training and development.

In any case, I think that the avid and contemplative spirit of the traveler – and painter – even as he finds a fruitful path in distant lands, can also have very fertile periods without leaving the workshop.

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**More info:**

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