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Twenty trips in thirty years: French Magnum photographer Patrick Zachmann has resolutely followed the transformation of China. His current photo book offers a multi-layered look into his China archive.

So long, China

PHOTOGRAPHY:
PATRICK ZACHMANN



During his first visit to China in 1982, Zachmann photographed extras in the film *Liao Zhongkai* by Tang Xiaodan, that was set in Shanghai in the thirties





“Night and day I shared the students’ enthusiasm as they challenged the authority of the old leadership. Neither I nor anyone else could have imagined the tragedy of June 4th.”

PATRICK ZACHMANN, MAY 1989



Tian'anmen Square on 17 and 18 May, 1989 (left and above) during the big demonstrations demanding more freedom and human rights; a scene in front of a Buddhist temple during the Chinese New Year, Hong Kong 1987 (below)





People are very curious watching the photographer as he works. The visit of a 'long nose' to Beijing in 1982 was very exceptional







Portrait of a young prostitute from Henan in a massage parlour, Beijing 2001 (above).
Chinese New Year in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, February 1991 (left)

The first time Patrick Zachmann visited China he explored gambling dens and opium dens, dark alleyways and dramatic love scenes; but as scenes for a film set in the thirties. At the time, he was one of the first western journalists granted permission to write about the Chinese film studios in Beijing and Shanghai. The visit began a journey of discovery with many subsequent episodes. In those

days the country was cut off from the outside world and, despite the constant presence of an official, Zachmann took advantage of the opportunity to explore and understand the country and its people – to go beyond the propaganda and censorship that made it difficult to take an independent view. In spite of the challenges of that first visit, he returned to China time and again, with noticeable improvement to

his working conditions. Zachmann has explored the country for the past thirty years. During that time-period, covering just one generation, the country has undergone an incredible transformation with a speed that becomes evident in Zachmann's pictures, which show the fractures that exist between modern-day China, its history and traditions. Zachmann develops a closeness with the people who ▶

are at the heart of his images, and who have been forced to adapt to the rapid changes in their life circumstances.

For his recently completed photo book, Zachmann reviewed his incredibly large amount of material and divided it into twenty chapters ordered thematically and chronologically. Notes from his travel diary accompany the pictures and they provide a direct way to share in his experiences. In 1987, five years after his first trip, Zachmann visited the south of China in addition to Beijing, and also travelled to Taiwan and Hong Kong. In May 1989 he documented the emergence of the Chinese democratic movement that was brutally destroyed a few weeks later. The images taken in and around Tian'anmen Square are testimony to the hopes of the students who dared to question the political authoritarian system. "Neither I nor anyone else expected the tragedy on June 4. History remembers the massacre; but before that drama unfolded there was an enormous swell of hope and dreams – a kind of Chinese Woodstock."

As of 2001, the first colour series emerged. Surreal night time images, empty construction sites, but above all the pulsing, often hidden night life of the metropolises, or the tough life of migrant workers in the cities. In the colour chapters, with complex staged wedding pictures or misleading billboards, Zachmann reveals the hope as well as the illusion in the worlds of the present. The demolition

of traditional streets and city districts and the consequent construction of faceless high-rise architecture also make for an impressive series. In the end however, people still remain at the forefront. In his latest series, *China – Too Fast*, Zachmann portrays family members of different generations, who are the victims of the barely comprehensible speed with which the country's society and culture are changing. The culture shock is written on the faces of each family, dealing with questions of identity, direction and tradition. Zachmann (born in 1955), who jokingly claims to have become a photographer because of a deficient memory, has brought these questions into his work since the start.

Zachmann covers stories both small and large. The book captures China's fast tempo with double-spread images while also giving enough space to take a closer look. It is a work full of surprises and understanding. ULRICH RÜTER



SO LONG, CHINA

Book: 592 pages, 345 images, 17 × 22.5 cm, French, Éditions Xavier Barral. Exhibition: So Long, China, 1982–2015 at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie (MEP), Paris, up until 5 June, 2016.

Photography: Patrick Zachmann/Magnum Photos





Portrait of a young prostitute with her boyfriend, a Triad member, Hong Kong, 1988. Zachmann repeatedly managed to get access to the secret night time milieus of the big cities