

ARTS+CULTURE



THEY'RE FLOCKING TO SEE CHI PENG'S PHOTOGRAPHS

ART ATTACK

CHRISTINE LASKOWSKI IS STOKED FOR SPRING

China is tough, opportunistic livin' and no one seems to capture that quite like **Peter Hessler** does, which is why there were a lot of disappointed people in Beijing when his promotional **book talks** for *Country Driving* at The Bookworm's International Literary Festival in March were cancelled. The gods be praised, he was kind enough to talk to me about his latest book, his writing methods, blogging and his plans for the setting of the **next chapter in his writing career**. See In Print Feature, p52, and look for the full interview to be posted online at TheBeijinger.com.

Shanghai this and Shanghai that. With 2010 Expo getting underway, the lit scene here is blooming with books about the city, such as *Shanghai: A History in Photographs, 1842-Today* by Beijingers **H.S. Liu** and **Karen Smith**.

In an interview with the accomplished pair at their enviable courtyard home, we got a little up-close and personal and learned, among other things, that we are not likely to get a Beijing photography monograph out of them any time soon. Again, head to our blog for the full interview.

May is quite the month for photography. **Wang Ningde's "Let There Be Light"** exhibition embarks on a journey of the human condition through black-and-white images, while the **Caochangdi PhotoSpring Festival** enters its second month. Also this month, artist **Chen Ke** wages guerilla artfare with her latest installation "**Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World**" at **Star Gallery** (see Art Feature, p50).

On stage, **Beijing Dance/LDTX's 3rd Modern Dance Festival** (May 6-16) features a new work by one of my

favorite choreographers of all time, **Sang Jijia**. Modern dance might not be for everybody, but what he does is simply transcendent. British choreographer **Akram Khan** injects a fusion of ethnic dance styles into **Bahok** (May 11, 14, 15). For more on that, see the Stage Feature, p52.

Everyone holds dear their very first computer game, and mine was **Prince of Persia**. The (very loose) film adaptation of this old-school game, must be viewed, however, if only to know whether the plot manages to incorporate hurdling over spikes ... As far as the local indie and avant-garde scene goes, the news is there's almost too much to choose from, as **Electric Shadows**, **Trainspotting**, **Channel Zero**, **BC MOMA**, the **French Culture Centre**, and **Instituto Cervantes** have all got their projectors polished and are ready to reel.

SNAPSHOTS

ART

In Beijing's art world, May means getting out of Dodge. To the **Sydney Biennale** (May 12-Aug 1) where Cai Guo-Qiang, Cao Fei, Liu Jianhua, Shen Shaomin, Sun Yuan & Peng Yu, Wang Qingsong and Yang Fudong will take turns hanging by the Harbour. Or to **Art Hong Kong** (May 27-30) to rub shoulders with global art gorillas **Gagosian** and **White Cube**. Staying home? Take in three exhibitions by über historian/curator Lv Peng (May 4-21). His next project, due this summer, is the first English translation of his monumental history of Chinese 20th century art. Even at EUR 140, it should be on every art lover's shopping list.

CINEMA

Sadly, there's nada for *cinco de mayo*, but from the land that brought us Borges, Che Guevara and *dulce de leche*, **Instituto Cervantes** brings an Argentine Film Festival. **Electric Shadows** is kicking off their year *deux* with some experimental shorts in a showcase of internationalism: Brazilian *Birds on the Wires*, French *animateurs*, and the music videos from the UK at **Penghao Theatre** on May 9. And there are rumors circulating that **D-22** might reinstate their film nights. Hollywood's general lack of screenwriting talent has produced yet another slew of sequels, with **Shrek Forever After** and **Iron Man 2** set to premiere this month.

IN PRINT

According to Penguin China's PR, *Shanghai: A History in Photographs, 1842-Today* will not be available in bookstores until May 1 – not even at The Bookworm, which will host a talk with the book's authors, **H.S. Liu** and **Karen Smith**, on May 26. On May 6, The Bookworm sheds more limelight on our southern neighbor with *Shanghai's Dancing World* by Andrew Field, whose book delves into the sensual world of its cabarets in the '20s and '30s. The China Culture Center's Book Club convenes May 25 with a discussion on Barbara Demick's *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*.

STAGE

Compared to Chinese filmmakers, stage directors seem to have more freedom to "come out" with narratives of homosexual love. Guided by Chinese artistic director Guan Jinpeng, **Lian Xiang Ban** tells a story of love between two women living in imperial China who marry the same man in order to be together. The inauguration of **BTV Grand Theater**, the television station's new venue, has been a pretty quiet affair, but won't be for much longer as the fifth annual **Croisements Festival** brings their own wild interpretation of *Snow White* to the stage there.

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

CHEN KE OPENS UP

by Madeleine O'Dea



CHEN KE EMBROIDERS A BETTER WORLD

On a spring afternoon in April, I entered a subterranean world. In a characterless apartment block near the Lido Hotel, I was ushered down a darkened stair to the basement, from where we picked our way to the sub-basement, nostrils assaulted by the smell of life lived at close quarters. My companion unlocked a door. As she fumbled with the light switch, the sweet smell of soap wafted from the open door. Then the light came on to reveal another world, a tiny white room decked out in embroideries. I had arrived at Open House.

Open House is the project of American curator sisters Megan and KC Connolly. Jaded with the

normal avenues of exhibition, they came up with another idea. They knew Beijing was full of empty rooms that were slated for demolition or rent. They also knew that post-Global Financial Crisis, many artists were disillusioned with commerce and looking for new ways to show their art. Relying on their own funds and minimal in-kind support, the Connollys have staged a series of one-day exhibitions around Beijing. It was the latest of these, an installation called *A Room of One's Own* by Chen Ke, at which I arrived after my underworld walk.

Chen Ke is one of China's most successful young artists. A graduate of the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts, she first came to Beijing in 2005 and soon found

success with a series of cute – not to say kitsch – paintings of wide-eyed girls in childish settings. Then on a six-month stay in Germany, she was deeply influenced by the work of Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich, who placed mysterious figures in moody landscapes. At the same time she became fascinated by the distinctive crackle patina of old masterpieces. On her return to Beijing, she started experimenting with how to achieve that texture of age.

In a new series of paintings now on show at Star Gallery in 798, Chen's canvases still feature the childish figures of her earlier works, but in a darker, more mysterious atmosphere. They are locked into fantasies and dreams, donning masks, wandering stony landscapes with icing-covered mountains,

“I WANT YOU TO HAVE THE FEELING THAT YOU ARE LOOKING THROUGH A HOLE INTO ANOTHER WORLD”

floating in space. And the circular canvases are speckled with holes and cracks in the manner of a European master.

Why circular? “I want you to have the feeling that you are looking through a hole into another world,” Chen replies. While her earlier paintings gave one the sense that she was still a child reveling in childish things, these paintings suggest the complexities of even the happiest of childhoods.

Discussing these works, it is clear that Chen feels too that she has finally grown up – and from the grand old age of 31 she is seeing her childhood more clearly. At the same time she has found herself taking a fresh look at the world around her.

When the Connollys offered Chen a migrant worker's room for an installation, she jumped at the chance to create a fantasy space for a quite different imaginary girl.

“I wanted to express a girl's life in Beijing. Many young girls come to Beijing to work for their dreams. I imagined a girl who rented a small room and in the daytime she goes to work, somewhere maybe very dull. But when she comes home she spends her night doing embroidery, because she wants to do something creative. Inside, she is very emotional and she has her dreams, so she expresses these with her stitching and creating this world for herself”

Together with her mother and a team of *ayis*, Chen worked for days to create a whole room out of embroideries. Those who visited Open House last month found at the end of the dark corridor a freshly scrubbed room in which a whole world had been stitched, from the “view” out the window to the test pattern on the “television set.”

Among the many visitors to *A Room of One's Own* was the director of the Star Gallery, who immediately saw that the installation should become a room within a room at Chen's painting exhibition.

Chen is delighted that the message of her Open House work will find a wider audience. “In Beijing you can see many normal young people. You might say they seem common, they don't have a special side, but I think they do. One by one, they are individuals, and they each have their own world.”

Chen Ke's A Room of One's Own will be shown in association with her new paintings until May 31 at Star Gallery (59789224). See www.chartcontemporary.com for news on future projects of ChART Contemporary.

ART: MARC RIBOUD – L'INSTINCT DE L'INSTANT

Marc Riboud is one of the greats of photojournalism, whose shots – in common with his Magnum photo-agency partners Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Capa – seem both to capture and define history. In images from the balletic painter touching up the Eiffel Tower in 1953, to the Summer of Love meeting military might in 1967 Washington, to his poignant documentation of China over 50 years and 20 visits from Mao to now, Riboud has discovered the essential moment. An inveterate traveler, Riboud has turned his lens from Europe to Africa to Asia. This retrospective is billed

as “probably” the most important of his career. If you love photography, don’t miss it. *Madeleine O’Dea*

Riboud’s photographs are on show through Jun 6 at the CAFA Museum (6477 1575)

FILM: WE ARE THE ... OF COMMUNISM

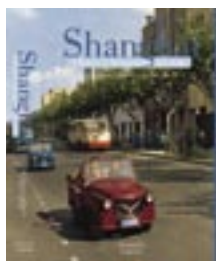
我们是共产主义省略号



Normally, kids will do anything to get out of going to school. For many migrant children, however, the opposite is true. Cut off from the free public education they would be entitled to in their hometowns, they attend private schools that are constantly at risk of being shut down by local officials. This documentary focuses on the sudden closing of Yuanhai Migrant School, located in Beijing’s Daxing District. Director Cui Zi’en doesn’t pursue any answers or perspective from the official side, or much from the parents or teachers for that matter; he chooses instead to focus

on the ethos of the kids, resulting in a film that captures the tragic and indefinite disruption of childhood inside the very city we live in. *Christine Laskowski*

This film can be purchased at Li Xianting Film Fund (6959 3827) www.lixianting.org

BOOKS: SHANGHAI:**A HISTORY IN PHOTOGRAPHS, 1842-TODAY**

Pulitzer-winning photographer Liu Heung Shing and local curator/historian Karen Smith were given a monumental task – to compile a photo monograph on Shanghai for the 2010 Expo’s Corporate Pavilion. But with great responsibility comes, well, unlimited access to private collections and the archives of libraries and newspapers. It also doesn’t hurt that the couple possesses a Rolodex of the most prominent photographers in China today, like Kai Zifeng and Chen Man (who, we were told, was not allowed to use Photoshop). Their fantastic juxtapositions of old and

new Shanghai – in copper etchings, family photos, and candid shots – chronicle the city from the Treaty of Nanking to the eve of the Expo itself. *Christine Laskowski*

Available at The Bookworm: RMB 500 (hardback), RMB 300 (paperback). See www.thebeijinger.com for an interview with Liu and Smith.

**DRAMA: FIVE ACTS OF LIFE –
LAO SHE’S SHORT STORIES**

From the director who brought a Chinese version of *Hamlet* to the Beijing stage comes a drama by Lao She, one of China’s most prolific 20th century playwrights. Lao’s tragedy explores class struggles in China’s early 20th century transition from feudalism to modernity. Director Lin Zhaohua shapes a cast of characters from the dregs of the class system: deserter brothers who share a wife, a gay Chinese opera performer and a wife bound by convention to her noble husband. Lao She’s humorous, satiric dialogue gives his motley characters a compelling dynamism. The authentic

Beijing accents employed by the Peking opera-trained cast are a bonus. *Cecily Huang*
Five Acts of Life runs from May 27-29 at Poly Theatre.

**MOVING ON**

IN ABSENTIA, PETER HESSLER BIDS CHINA FAREWELL

by Christine Laskowski

When author Peter Hessler left China in 2007, it was not simply a physical relocation. The move marked an intentional change in the direction of his writing career – a career forged on his intimate portraits of a Chinese society in flux and transitioning into the new millennium.

“I basically decided that this would be the end of my China writing – more for writing reasons,” Hessler explained in a phone interview from his rural Colorado home. “As a writer, it’s better to have a range of subjects. I think now’s a good stopping point.”

With a writing career in China that has spanned over a decade, Hessler

“I THINK NOW’S A GOOD STOPPING POINT”

made a name for himself as *The New Yorker’s* China correspondent (2000-2007) and a contributor for *National Geographic*. He also produced three books: *River Town* (2001), *Oracle Bones* (2006), and the final book in his China trilogy, *Country Driving*, published in February of this year.

He was scheduled to make several appearances at The Bookworm’s International Literary Festival in March as part of a promotional tour for *Country Driving*, but his wife’s emergency surgery and a China visa refusal forced him to cancel his sold-out talks.

But if not China, then where? For

Hessler and his wife, Leslie T. Chang, also an accomplished writer, the plan is to move somewhere in the Middle East; the objective is to learn a new language and write about that community as he wrote about China.

Hessler’s objective is often not so much securing a story as satisfying his own curiosity. Being able to hold a conversation is key, he says, but knowing a language goes far beyond vocabulary and syntax.

“There are lot of elements to a language – there are a lot of things you can’t even put your finger on,” he said. “I think that’s one of my better skills

– there are certain unspoken things that I do.”

Pressed to elaborate, Hessler responded, “I was always asking people questions and I wasn’t writing anything, I just wanted to learn. I never thought: This is an interview and I have to talk in this formal way,” adding, “I believe it helps because I can ask questions in a way that doesn’t make people nervous. It had a lot to do with the Peace Corps, though.”

“Chinese people like to talk, but they’re not efficient conversationalists. They’re not in a rush.”

For the full version of the interview, see www.thebeijinger.com.

NICK BONNER

FOUNDER, KORYO TOURS



BACK TO BAHOK

THE AKRAM KHAN COMPANY RETURNS

by Cecily Huang

It appears airports are not merely useful as the setting for Tom Hanks films. Akram Khan, the British-Bengali choreographer, has also chosen to utilize an airport to “trap” eight dancers of various nationalities in transit.

His piece is entitled *Bahok*, which means “carrier” in Bengali. It alludes to the idea that the traveler “carries” their identity. Khan himself exemplifies that notion. Trained in both traditional Indian Kathak dancing and modern dance, he is a leading figure among artists melding Asian and Western contemporary dance.

The dancers’ nationalities are revealed by their distinctive dance styles: the dancer with tai chi-infused movements is Chinese and the dancer with the sari and Bollywood flair is from India.

Beyond their choreography, the characters’ identities in some respects become a display of stereotypes – and while it can be accurate and entertaining at times, it is not always compelling. Chinese passengers are seen taking photos of themselves with mobile phones; a desperate Spanish woman, frantically searching for something, annoys a fellow traveler.

But Khan does bring a poetry to the stage with poignant and touching exchanges between his dancers. In one scene, a drunk, exhausted girl drops into a chair and immediately falls asleep. Her head lolls onto her neighbor’s shoulder. Irritated, he attempts to push her head back, but she accidentally kisses him. A beautiful pas de deux begins, where for a moment, they meld into one person moving gracefully and sensuously with four arms.

“I WANTED TO EXPLORE THAT SENSE OF PEOPLE TRAPPED AND UNABLE TO GET BACK HOME”

Humor, too, is created by the collision between the bizarre moments and misunderstandings over the dialogue. Meanwhile, the vibrant score from Nitin Sawhney is perfectly matched to the rhythm and the emotion in Khan’s dynamic choreography.

Bahok, originally a collaboration with the National Ballet of China, premiered in Beijing in 2008. It is inspired by Khan’s personal experience of being “stuck in an elevator in Japan, surrounded by people from different cultures, in different cultural costumes,” which inspired him to “explore that sense of people trapped and unable to get back home.”

Bahok will be performed on May 11 at Peking University Concert Hall and on May 14-15 at Mei Lanfang Grand Theater.

My favorite book from childhood was Gerald Durrell’s *My Family and Other Animals*. I was brought up in magical surroundings in the English countryside, with streams and woods to play in. Durrell had the same, but in Corfu – hotter, warmer and with a madder family than mine.

The last book I bought was *Under the Frog* by Tibor Fischer. Cracking read.

The book that has the most sentimental value for me? In the late 1990s, I popped into the Central Academy of Fine Arts. It was a pretty rough-looking place at that time, with a lime-green and off-white wall, a big cold space that just swallowed up art. There was a sign at the entrance saying “Please do not stroke the paintings.” I loved the place – and still do – but then it was very hit-and-miss as to the art being of any quality. One trip I went into the main gallery and the walls were covered in this incredible artwork. The works were by the Chinese artist who worked under the name Sadj. He was born in 1914 and had started painting as a lad, studied in Belgium but suffered from schizophrenia. For a long period he couldn’t paint, but he resumed working in his later years, and the later pieces were such

a contrast to his work as a young man, full of incredibly powerful imagery. I bought the exhibition catalogue and always pick it up for inspiration.

A book that changed my life was William Boyd’s *Any Human Heart*. Good for when you hit your forties and realize either it’s half over or you are just getting warmed up.

The last book I read was *The Spy who Disappeared* by Reginald Teague-Jones. Unbelievable derring-do, *Boy’s Own* stuff. It’s out of print, but worth tracking down.

Have I ever judged a book by its cover? The designs by Jeff Fisher for Louis de Bernières’ *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin* led me to pick up the book; the imagery and the story were in the same vein. I felt robbed when I went for another cover with a great simple image and treatment, but a terrible read: *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* (by Marina Lewycka).

If someone was to only ever read one book about China, I’d tell them to forget China – pick up DPRK leader Kim Jong-il’s *On the Art of the Cinema* and find everything you need about how to make a film ...

