

THE CITY OF FLOWERS
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Dezső Bozóky's Canton Photographs



香港大學美術博物館
University Museum and Art Gallery
The University of Hong Kong

in

THE CITY OF FLOWERS: Dezső Bozóky's Canton Photographs

Exhibition Curator
DR FLORIAN KNOTHE

Translator
STEVE KANE

Digital Images
TAMÁS SZEKLENCI—POSZTERFOTÓ STÚDIO (BUDAPEST)

Colour Retouching
VIRÁG LACZKOVICH

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Designer
STEPHY TSUI

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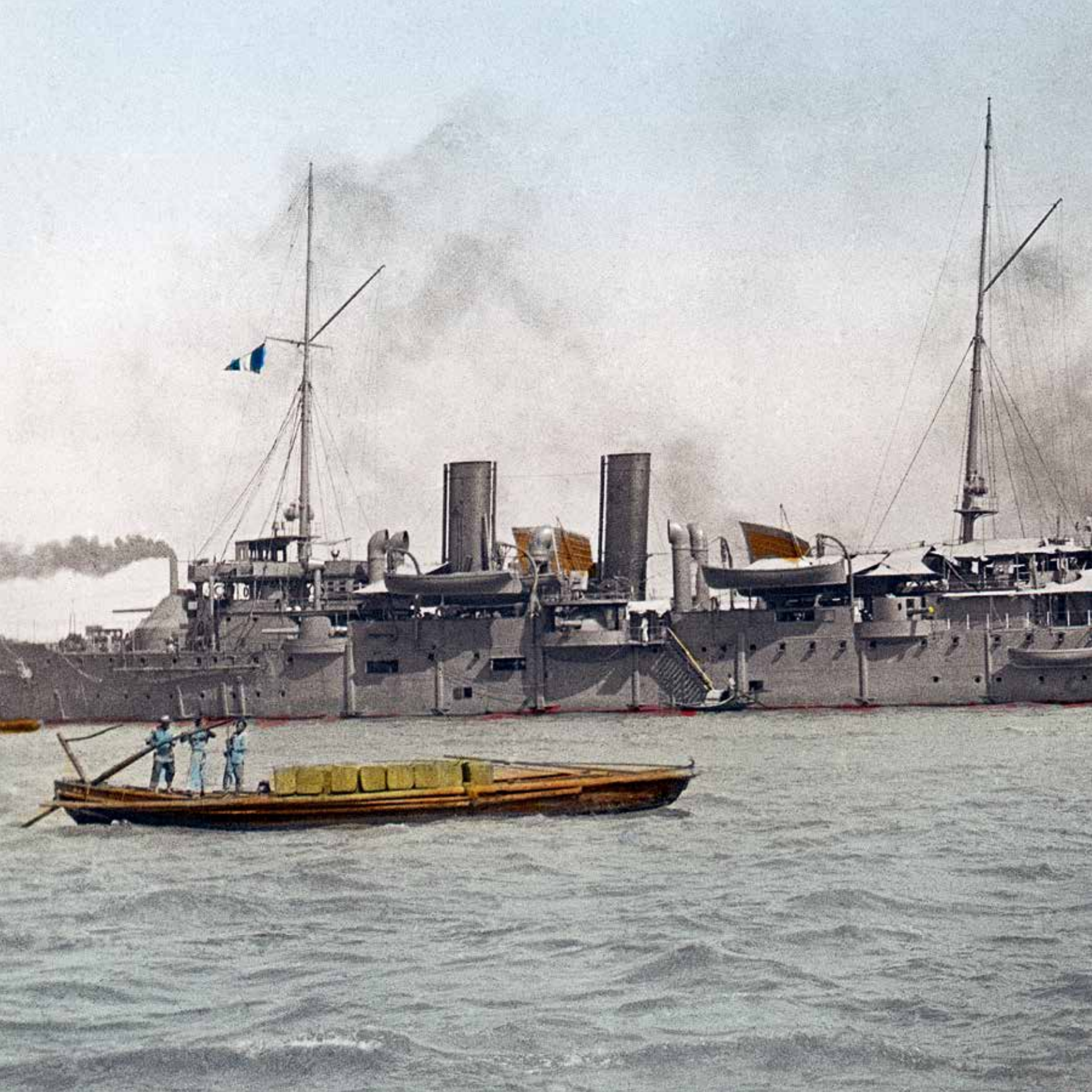


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FOREWORD

DR FLORIAN KNOTHE

Director, University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong

As a naval officer with the Austro-Hungarian Navy, Dezső Bozóky first left Hong Kong for Canton before travelling to Fujian province, Shanghai and Beijing, where he documented the countryside and cities as well as their inhabitants. His interest in nature and architecture and, above all, the Qing dynasty street scenes and people he met, continue to transmit the excitement and wonder of this early European traveler in a country and culture far from his own.

Following the 2016 exhibition of Dezső Bozóky's photographs of Hong Kong—*Two Years in Asia: Travelling in Hong Kong 1907–1909*—the University Museum and Art Gallery (UMAG) was honoured to present a larger group of Bozóky's images that document his time exploring provinces across the Middle Kingdom. *Along China's Coast: Dezső Bozóky's Travel Photography 1908–1909* was exhibited at UMAG from 8 November 2019 to 9 February 2020. These exhibitions and associated publications were made possible thanks to the collaboration and generous support of the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Arts in Budapest and the Hungarian Consulate General in Hong Kong and Macau.

This second volume examines Bozóky's visits to Canton in two sections—'Voyaging Along the Pearl River' and 'Adventuring in Canton'. A foreign visitor to this seaside town and commercial harbour, Bozóky was struck by Canton's lively streets and canals, by its hybrid architecture and complex urban fabric, and by the juxtaposition of modern and traditional lifestyles. Travelling with friends and assistants, the photographer recorded a society that was undergoing substantial change, and provides us with a contemporary image of an historic era.



VOYAGING ALONG THE PEARL RIVER

During my time in China one of the most fascinating journeys was undoubtedly the three weeks that I spent in Canton. There is no other city in the vast Empire of Heaven quite as fascinating. Here, one is able to experience how the Chinese truly live! Although the New Year's festivities had already finished in Hong Kong, every store in Canton was still closed, for the locals maintain the tradition of spending the entire three weeks celebrating the only official holiday on the Chinese calendar. Since the celebration had altered the everyday character of the city, I considered this an opportune time to embark on a three-day excursion up the Pearl River, along one of its tributaries known as the West River. To this day, the excursion remains one of my fondest memories.

In Canton I happened to become acquainted with Mr Johnson, an immensely engaging and affable young man who was employed by an international company. One evening in a bar, we found ourselves discussing the details of a forthcoming excursion. We happily agreed to his plan to rent a small steamboat for the trip; we would employ servants and a cook, and of course supply ourselves with the necessary food and drink. Travelling as far as the towns of Hau-Lik and Shui-Hin, we would see beautiful stretches of river. From there we would proceed on foot through the karst hills to a Buddhist monastery on Dinghu Mountain, situated deep in the wilderness. Our excitement only increased when Mr Johnson predicted an eighty-percent chance that we would see tigers, based on the number of animals that still roamed the area. He added forthwith, however, that we would face absolutely no danger, for we would only venture out in broad daylight, and during the day tigers are cowardly creatures who promptly make their escape at the sight of humans. I had splendid dreams that night. In the rocky, palm-fringed jungle I envisioned magnificent royal tigers. And it was lucky that I saw them in my dreams, for in reality we did not come across so much as a tiger cub.

When I went up on deck the next morning, I caught my first glimpse of the white steamboat anchored close by, puffing away merrily with a French flag at its stern. The crew and supplies were already on board; we only needed to haul over our bedclothes, blankets and toiletries, and then the craft would be on its way to the town of Sam-Shui, beneath whose walls it



would await us the next morning. From there we intended to travel by train. The boat required an entire day from Canton, following the river's serpentine twists and turns.

In the dawn twilight the following day, four of us, including our friend Mr Johnson, disembarked from the ship and hastened by rowboat to the station. I had brought along my orderly, a Hungarian boy who had previously worked as a waiter in Budapest's East Terminus train station. The boy deserved to see something of the world! After a pleasant two-hour train ride along the American-built, broad-gauge railway—which China had purchased from them a few years earlier—we reached the final stop in Sam-Shui. In several places the track was extremely bumpy, but we made it through relatively unscathed. I wondered about its condition some years from now, under Chinese management and maintenance. The Chinese are now beginning to develop a sense of patriotism and national pride, and plan to build their own railway system using Chinese capital. A few new railway lines are currently under construction, led primarily by dubious American and European clerks and draughtsmen pretending to be trained engineers. With no expertise at all, they began drilling a long railway tunnel, which subsequently collapsed and buried a large number of workers. Our train also passed through the expansive city of Fat-Shan, whose mere existence, despite having a population of close to a million souls, is barely known in Europe. I, for one, had never heard of it. The railway station in this city of a million, which is actually Guangdong's main factory town, is a wretched little

hut. In Europe it would at most be used as a guardhouse. By chance, the train brought us together with a figure who could have come straight out of the *Fliegende Blätter*, a short-sighted German entomologist whose waistcoat pockets were brimming with beetles and caterpillars. He was heading for a Buddhist monastery to collect insects, but he had not yet considered how he would find his way. He simply had stuffed a map into his pocket and set off. We assumed he must be intending to stay for two or three months, as he was accompanied by a large and elegant yellow steamer trunk. We could barely contain our laughter when we heard that his scientific expedition was to last only two days, but as he had nothing smaller, he had packed this enormous trunk, generally meant for ocean cruises, with only a nightshirt, a pair of slippers, a couple of handkerchiefs and his toothbrush.

Sam-Shui railway station stands along a great meadow, from where, due to a distinct absence of rickshaws and palanquins, we walked in single file along a narrow path, surrounded by colourful Chinese folk heading for the town on the bank of the same river where our boat was waiting. The professor's enormous trunk was carried on a pole by two porters. Our caravan must have been quite an imposing sight to the Chinese. With the assistance of sampans we traversed to our boat anchored in the middle of the river, inviting the professor, who was a rather likeable fellow, to come with us as far as Hau-Lik. From there he could continue his trek to the monastery on foot. If we had not taken him with us, the stalwart German



The enormous river suddenly narrowed, like the Kazan Gorge on the Danube. The rushing current is constrained between wild cliffs stretching up to the sky. Slender, staggered pagodas dot the mountains, with small towns and villages beneath. Only pagodas and towering, windowless strongholds rise over the grey roof tiles. At around four in the afternoon we docked in front of the noble grey walls of the city of Shui-Hin. It is almost completely overgrown with grass and bushes, and its crumbling, tall pagoda is beautifully reflected in the smooth surface of the river. As we passed through this ancient town, the Chinese stared back at us with just as much astonishment, and we often heard them mutter behind our backs, 'foreign devils'. Emerging from the city, as far as the eye could see, were endless marshes and rice fields idling in the winter rest period, where no tigers—but shockingly large water buffalo—roamed, while above the marshes flitted magically luminous kingfishers with magnificent blue-green plumage. Though these are strange, somewhat gloomy climes, this blessed land can be harvested five times a year. Between the marshes are tall, winding embankments whose upper sections, covered with slippery granite blocks placed at an angle, are so narrow that one can hardly step aside for those coming in the other direction without the risk of sliding down. And there were hordes of people coming at us along the narrow embankment, as here, too, they were still celebrating the New Year. Thousands upon thousands—men, women and children, all dressed in their finest clothes—moving along on foot or in palanquins, heading for the temples in the karst hills. It was a slightly foggy and misty grey day,





but in this atmosphere, the extraordinary landscape emerging from the muggy air was, if anything, even more surprising. Out of the flooded rice fields rose seven hills with nearly vertical faces, 200 or 300 metres in height, culminating in bizarre peaks all gloriously reflected in the completely still surface of the water. In places, the hillsides are dense with trees and banana palms, interspersed with red Buddhist temples with elaborate roofs and steep granite stairways. All around were throngs of festive people. In the temples they sounded gongs, burning sacrificial joss papers and incense, and letting off rockets and firecrackers. The bonzes were raking in a good harvest.

We climbed to the top of one of the hills for a panoramic view of the endless rice fields, crossed by a web of winding embankments topped with an uninterrupted stream of people moving like a brightly coloured serpent. On my shoulder I carried my camera, fixed to its tripod, ready to shoot; but no matter how quickly I set it up, the pretty Chinese girls and women were always a step quicker, leaping from the lens, or at least covering their faces with silk scarves, which resulted in me achieving little with my photography.

The third hill, shaped exactly like a sugarloaf, contained a sacred cave complex. Inside the cave, amid the fragrant smoke pervading the semi-darkness, we could see the pilgrims circulating around the idols. A few youngsters immediately came over to us and took it upon themselves to be our guides. One of them climbed as agilely as a monkey up to the top of



ADVENTURING IN CANTON

Our ship reached the mouth of the Pearl River Delta, the 'Bocca Tigris'. From the hills on both shores, enormous Krupp cannons stared down from their Chinese fortifications. After passing between the bizarrely shaped hills, the scenery began to grow considerably flatter. We were now within the river's mighty delta. As far as the eye could see, the capriciously winding branches of the broad river were interspersed with swamps and marshes. We occasionally caught a glimpse of lush, green rice fields fringed with lovely banana palms; or a Chinese village with its towering Buddhist temple topped in grey tiles. British cruisers, torpedo boats and steam barges glided past us on the river's murky waves. Ostensibly they were here to protect the British merchant ships, when in actual fact they are a reminder

to the Chinese who still owe them compensation for the most recent pirate raid. Increasingly larger junks begin to appear along the river, their reed sails stretched over bamboo frames that resemble bat wings; there are also an increasing number of tiny sampans. The occasional naval junk passes by, decorated with fearsome demons flying triangular, dragon-emblazoned flags with two or three smaller antediluvian cannons. We are approaching Canton, the largest city in the Empire of Heaven, home to nearly three million souls.

At around five in the afternoon we arrived at the last major bend in the river, just downstream from the city. Sounding its ear-piercing siren, our ship made its passage among the thousands of vessels thronging the water, each of which made every effort to flit in front of our ship's bow at the very last moment. According to Chinese superstition this casts good fortune on the sampans, but also causes an enormous amount of frustration for the ship's captain. Between the great steamships, junks transporting rice move forward at a sluggish pace, propelled by labourers in broad-rimmed bamboo hats shouting as they row. Here is a decorative, double-decker flower-boat adorned with splendid gilt carvings; mirrors and brightly coloured flags emblazoned with red Chinese characters; over there, a pretty teahouse-boat is pulled by a steam barge, with slipper-shaped sampans arranged in between. A curiously designed steamboat approaches in the opposite direction, driven by a single large paddlewheel rotating at its stern. It is only when we are side by side that I can see it is not powered





spindly aerial roots hang down like Christmas decorations. This little European republic is a true oasis in the heart of China's largest city. The consulates and banks are located here, along with the headquarters of major European companies and the only European hotel, the British Victoria, which offers meagre comforts at steep prices.

But what rebellion is afoot across from Shamian, where our ship is preparing to dock? Standing on wooden scaffolding along the shore is a terrifying, roaring crowd of muscular, half-naked brutes twirling fearsome bamboo sticks. Our minds automatically turn to the weapons we recently saw in a restaurant, but it turns out these are only innocent porters waiting for our ship to arrive, which they will occupy shortly. Some of them do not even wait for the ship to halt, clambering up like monkeys onto its smooth sides, using ropes fitted with grappling hooks that they throw onto the ship while it is still in motion. Witnessing this gives us some idea of how the river pirates manage to assail steamboats travelling at full speed. I survived the assault relatively unscathed, as did my trunk, which was now being pulled in eight different directions by as many muscle-bound porters. Our ship was surrounded by sampans rowed exclusively by women, which is how we also were transported to our hotel. The countless sampans wedged into the narrow channel separating Shamian from the Chinese city creaked and clattered as we literally elbowed our way between. Our own little craft sometimes made ominous cracking sounds, but with a sure hand, and an even surer tongue, the sturdy



We also climbed the city's walls, where the old rusty iron cannons still stand, overgrown with weeds and bushes. The Five-story Pagoda towers over the northern wall; the top level offering a panoramic view across the whole of Canton. The city is spread out beneath our feet, like looking upon the sea of Paris from the Eiffel Tower. The streets are so grey that they cannot be distinguished from here. In the distance there is an occasional glimmer from the silver strip of the Pearl River. The grey roof tiles are only interrupted by the nine-story Flower Pagoda, which is now 1,200 years old, the twin towers of the Catholic cathedral—resembling the Votivkirche in Vienna—and a few towering, windowless stone bastions. The latter are strongholds that were built to withstand the frequent threat of fire. If fire breaks out in their vicinity, the valuables are kept safe in the towers' underground rooms. Behind us, at the foot of the city wall, we can see the aftermath of terrible destruction. A few weeks ago, a gunpowder tower had exploded.

To our left is an area of the city filled with attractive, whitewashed brick houses with clay roofs standing beneath expansive shade trees. The streets between these houses look remarkably clean and enticing. What a unique district! All of the streets are, by Chinese standards, beautifully paved and abound with an endless line of spectacular blooming chrysanthemums in colourful majolica pots. There are, however, no people on these streets, for why would the living ever visit the City of the Dead, where all of the houses are hotels for the departed? Each one-room apartment overlooks the street, and

