Ethnographic photography and travel writing have long been companions in the narrative documentation of journeys undertaken, and they often encode colonial power relations of a modern Western traveler and a non-Western native subject. The visual and textual documentation of Clärenore Stinnes’s1 and Carl-Axel Söderström’s round-the-world automobile journey between 1927–1929 can be read as a testament to this practice. At a time in which much of the world was grappling with extreme economic hardship, their 1929 travel story and 1931 documentary film both entitled Im Auto durch zwei Welten sought to prove the superiority of the German automobile and provide a hopeful distraction for German industrialists and consumers.2 With Fitzcarraldo-like tenacity in moving her vehicle through territory where no roads, bridges, or tunnels yet existed, as the instigator and organizer of the voyage, Stinnes urgently needed visual documentation to prove the «authenticity» of her undertaking, and so she hired the professional Swedish cameraman Carl-Axel Söderström.3 As an artist, Söderström was a different creature than the risk-taking young traveler by his side, and his photographs reflect a curiosity about the foreign not bent solely on «capturing» images to prove a point. The photographic capture as an approach to «conquering the foreign» is one of postcolonialism’s most common criticisms of Western travel imagery. I will consider a relationship between Eastern and Western aesthetics via Söderström’s photographs that reflects a transcultural exchange of sorts, concuring with Xiaomei Chen, who comments that «Arguing against [Western] cultural imperialism is to explore only one side of the coin, albeit an important one» (156). Along these lines, Russell Berman has argued that hybridization and transculturalism are «immanent to the colonial situation itself […]. In this German case […] it can entail aspects of violent domination, [but] it also allows for transgression, mixing and plurality» (15).4 While reading European travel photography of a China still colonized by Western and Eastern (Japanese) powers against the narrative of imperialism exposes gaps, ambiguities, and contradictions, I suggest that the mutual aesthetic and artistic inquiry taking place between Europe and China in the 1920s and 1930s opens up a space for considering perspectives that cross cultural and national
divides more affirmatively. Inspired by recent debates on photographic practices and the work of feminist transnational theory, I propose to read Söderström’s photographs with this perspective in mind. My analysis of a group of photographs that Söderström made in China offers the possibility of looking beyond the surface image of a photograph to open an intercultural dialogue between referent and viewer.

In March 1928, after almost a year on the road, having passed through the Middle East, (including Turkey, Lebanon, Iran/Persia, Iraq, Syria), the Soviet Union (including a harrowing trip across the frozen Lake Baikal in Siberia in −36-degree Celsius temperatures), and Mongolia (including repeated escapes from «Gobi desert bandits»), Stinnes’s 50-horsepower «Adler Standard» and Söderström’s Adler supply truck are loaded atop a cargo train of the Chinese army and pass through the Great Wall of China. Neither Stinnes’s nor Söderström’s writing includes much detail of the politically complex situation in which the pair found themselves, and China in 1928 was no tourist destination.5 Chiang Kai-shek’s military campaign against feudalism and imperialism (supported by Soviet communists) had just come to an end, plunging the country into a civil war. Driving eastward from Kalgan to Nankau, Stinnes and Söderström witness plentiful ominous signs of unrest, as Stinnes reports almost matter-of-factly: «Auf der Brücke … waren an Stöcken die Köpfe von Hingerichteten als schreckliche Warnung aufgespießt» (Kuball and Stinnes 152). Stinnes was not deterred by such sights, for that would have run counter to the feisty determination with which she pursued her travel goals. Stinnes’s «Hauptinteresse im Kennenlernen der Länder und Völker» (Stinnes 22) results in prose that combines the rather scientific colonial ethnography of the nineteenth century with the sober description of reportage-style New Objectivity popular at the time, as in Christopher Isherwood’s detached camera in Goodbye to Berlin that states, «I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking» (1). Like the New Woman of the 1920s and 1930s who becomes «masculinized,» Stinnes cross-dresses, sticks to an unemotional, descriptive prose, and selects primarily «objective» landscape photographs (to counter the stereotype of female travel writers as being unscientific).6

Given the collaborative effort of their journey and its visual and textual production, it is difficult to consider Stinnes’s and Söderström’s work separately. As regards the latter, the source of my analysis is the 1981 publication of Söderström’s Photo-Tagebuch, 1927–1929: Die erste Autofahrt einer Frau um die Welt, another visual-textual collaboration of sorts. Made up of a collection of photographs and diary entries from the 1927 trip that Söderström had sent home to his family, it was published by Stinnes and filmmaker Mi-
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Michael Kuball after Söderström’s death in 1976. Included are additional travel documents, letters, postcards, newspaper articles, and excerpts from Stinnes’s original travel story, offering more «factual» textual evidence to balance the photographic representation. By contrast, Söderström’s Photo-Tagebuch provides a more personalized subtext and nuance to the rather detached description of the journey that Stinnes constructed in *Im Auto durch zwei Welten*. His writing is prone to «feminine» emotional outbursts, and the majority of photographs in *Photo-Tagebuch* reflect an interest in people over landscapes (countering the traditional gendered nature of colonial travel photography). While keeping to her own stalwart self-image in the introduction to *Söderström’s Photo-Tagebuch* – which takes the form of an interview conducted by Kuball with Stinnes – Stinnes offers a glimpse of the emotions at play for Söderström: «Er hatte unendliches Heimweh, aber ich habe mich um die privaten Angelegenheiten der Männer nicht gekümmert» (Kuball and Stinnes 19).

While Söderström’s diaries reveal the physical and mental anguish that he silently suffered during the expedition, the fuller glimpse of his photographs offered in the *Photo-Tagebuch* (as compared with the select few published in Stinnes’s 1927 text) also reveals an artist swept up in the spirit of adventure and enthralled with the work of fellow artists and performers in far-away lands, in particular China. The photographs combine elements of ethnographic study, historical documentary, and tourist snapshot, but they also document a self-reflexive engagement with the idea of culture as performance. With this focus in mind, Söderström’s photographs of China offer the opportunity to see early twentieth-century European travel photography as more than simply «objective» visual documentation of the foreign.

Söderström’s China chapter begins with an oversized photograph of Stinnes reclining on a tree limb with a white handkerchief lying over her face, covering it entirely, marking what might be read as her approach to «seeing» China. Of the twenty subsequent images that make up the chapter, four photographs are of different theater troupes and musicians, four photos depict the procession to an execution, a series of two photos show a woman and her bound feet – in one we see a long-shot of a woman on a donkey, and then in the next we see a close-up of her naked lotus-shaped feet. Five other photographs in the series highlight either Stinnes or Söderström against various landscapes with or without their automobiles. Included is also one photograph of a bustling street scene of Beijing with cars, rickshaws, and people, one captures a distant shot of the Temple of Heaven, and the final image is of a nearly naked mine laborer crawling into a mining pit on hands and feet with a huge basket strapped to his head, looking directly at the camera. To narrow the focus of
my study, I will concentrate on three themes – the woman and her feet as fetish, the aspect of theatricality and performance that dominates the series, and the self-reflexivity of visual technology in the photograph of a performing shadow puppet master. In their engagement with the issues of performance and representation, the photographs call into question the binaries of the self and the other, the familiar and the foreign.

Söderström’s interest in Chinese cultural and representational forms is indicative of the mutual fascination and exchange between Chinese and European artists that takes place in the 1920s and 1930s. The May Fourth movement in 1919 that introduced Western literary and philosophical traditions to China has impacted Chinese theory and practice in both positive and negative terms. In Maoist China, Western influences were seen positively by Chinese intellectuals as a way to fight ideological oppression in a totalitarian society. In Stinnes’s and Söderström’s time, Western practices were perceived as “new” and “modern,” but also served the project of Western cultural imperialism in their tendency to try to “civilize” ancient cultural practices (Chow 35). An example of German-Chinese artistic inquiry in the 1930s that demonstrates the complexity of reading the colonial from a one-sided perspective of Western imperialism is perhaps most apparent in the work of Bertolt Brecht.8 Brecht’s essay “Verfremdungseffekte in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst” was published in 1935 after he experienced a “Beijing Opera” performance by Mei Lanfang (1894–1961) in Moscow. Although Chinese artistry influenced German theater through Brecht early on, the work of Brecht in China did not catch on until the 1950s – particularly after a 1959 cultural agreement was made between The People’s Republic of China and the then Federal Republic of Germany. Brecht has remained central to Chinese theater, according to Rong Guangrun, because of the way in which his theories were built, in particular, on Chinese traditions:

The introduction of Brecht could be regarded as the most important [of the schools of modern theater in China]. [H]is breaking through of the “fourth wall” has something in common with the aesthetics and artistic forms of Chinese traditional opera, and his known love and understanding of Chinese traditional opera and Chinese culture undoubtedly induced a feeling of kinship among Chinese theater practitioners. (249)

The example of Brecht as influenced by Chinese theatrical practices (and vice-versa) offers a glimpse of how east-west aesthetics might be mutually beneficial, although Brecht’s encounter and its aftermath clearly takes place after Stinnes’s and Söderström’s trip to China. That said, what Söderström’s photographs set out to do – namely provide “evidence” of their encounter with the foreign in 1928 – also captures an interesting variation on the “absence of
the fourth wall» that Brecht will later describe for Western intellectuals. And yet, in moving beyond Brecht’s discussion of the theater, Söderström’s photograph of Chinese shadow puppetry that I will discuss in this context speaks to a broader range of influence, from ancient shadow artistry to Benjamin’s modern discussion of «Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.»

Different representations of the journey – from the written, to the visual, to the artifactual – necessitate the consideration of different formal principles for reading those texts. At roughly the same time that Stinnes and Söderström are busy collecting images as proof of their encounter with «the foreign,» critics of photography such as Walter Benjamin and later Roland Barthes are refuting photography’s claims to visual objectivity and authenticity, reminding us of the ephemeral, random, and unconscious nature of photographs. While Foucault and Said offer crucial insights of photographic imagery of a certain time and place as reflecting a set of cultural and political dispositions held by the makers of those images, Christopher Pinney and Nicholas Peterson suggest that we look beyond the colonial subject/object binary to see how images might speak to us from an interior position not immediately anticipated or intended by the (Western) viewer/photographer. For, as Pinney in his introduction to Photography’s Other Histories points out, «[H]owever hard the photographer tries to exclude, the camera lens always includes» (7). Informed by Peterson’s and Pinney’s postcolonial focus, I am interested in understanding how we can «look past» the colonial surface of Söderström’s photographs and consider how a dialogue between referent and viewer might take place. From this perspective, the photographs create an interesting exchange of cultural information that challenges traditional subject/object binaries. Furthermore, building on the idea of the transnational as defined by Karen Caplan and Interpal Grewal in which «structures of cultural exchange» challenge the binary oppositions of colonial discourse (9), my analysis challenges the perception of Söderström’s photographs as documents of Western technology as produced by a single individual to exploit native peoples.

The conventions of Western travel photography – that it seeks to conquer foreign territory and exploit indigenous peoples – are key to postcolonial debates. In brief consideration, these practices offer a measurement against which we can read Söderström’s photographs as offering something potentially different. In her study on photography in the nineteenth century, Nancy Armstrong discusses how the landscaping and gardensque aesthetics of wealthy English suburbanites and their «desire to possess an uncultivated landscape as one’s own» carried over into the documentation of their travels (61). As the nineteenth-century garden landscaper Humphry Repton states, «[A]fter all, the most romantic spot, the most picturesque situations, and the
most delightful assemblage of nature’s choice materials, will not engage our interest, without some appropriation; something we can call our own [...].» (qtd. in Armstrong 62). In Stinnes’s original 1929 text, the numerous «empty» landscape shots and descriptions of deserted terrains situate Stinnes’s and Söderström’s automobile journey within this tradition of panoramic travel photography, and offers ample opportunities to textually and visually «appropriate» the countryside. For example, Stinnes applies the aesthetic of German Romanticism in her description of the city of Beirut to allow her European readers to identify more easily with (or appropriate) the «foreign»:

Die Gegend hatte durch die vielen Ruinen verschollener Städte und Dörfer, an denen wir vorbeikamen, ein anderes Aussehen als die bisher durchfahrenen Gebiete. Romantik wob sich um die Steintrümmer, die einstmals Mittelpunkt blühenden Lebens gewesen waren. Das klare Blau des Himmels und die von der untergehenden Sonne in flüssiges Gold getauchten Berge ließen die Wüstenacht ahnen, die uns bevorstand. Noch wasserloser als in Anatolien war das Land auf dem Wege nach Beirut, der Stadt, bei der man im Zweifel sein konnte, ob man noch in Asien oder schon wieder in Europa war. (53)

The reference to Romantic ruins dovetails with the blurring of boundaries between the East and the West. This blurring recalls Stinnes’s frequent emphasis «on the rugged landscape around cities before actually entering the city.» Due to the nature of their travel with the automobile, Stinnes and Söderström experience a gradual movement from the exterior landscape of the city into the city itself. While pastoral expanses outside of cities do not always evoke Romantic German landscapes, on almost all occasions they offer moments in which Stinnes and Söderström attempt to improve or appropriate the area (people, animals, roadways) in some way. Immobilized in heavy caravan traffic just outside of Tehran, the pair spot a load-bearing ox with a broken leg. They convince the owner to sell the animal, which they then promptly shoot and abandon (in Western «compassion» for its misery), much to the shock (and insult) of Iranian caravan witnesses, but the congested roadway eases up. In another instance, on their way to Kasan, the travelers are forced to repair a collapsed bridge, and the crowd of Russian farmers drawn by the commotion gives Stinnes opportunity to caution against the practice of alcohol abuse (i.e., if they didn’t drink so much, they would have built a better bridge). Stinnes’s construction of such archaic belts around cities prepare her for taking «visual control of the city.»

By contrast, their entrance into the ancient, carefully guarded, walled city of Beijing offers nothing of this feeling of ostensible control. Once allowed entrance, their attempt to orient themselves ends in labyrinth-like confusion: «Dem Gefühl folgend hielten wir uns an die großen Straßenzüge, von denen
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wir annahmen, daß sie uns in das Innere der Stadt bringen würden. Zwei Tore, durch die die Straße führte, betrachteten wir als den richtigen Weg; wir wurden aber schnell eines Besseren belehrt als Soldaten vorsprangen und uns Baronette entgegenstreckten» (149). Stinnes complains that is she unable to gain visual access to any of the private homes in Beijing: «[K]ein Einblick in das Innere eines Hofes war möglich» (148). Indeed, in the midst of her descriptions of the cacophony of Beijing’s city streets and her confusion in attempting to interpret what she sees and hears – «Wir unterschieden nicht den Sinn der Töne» (150) – she offers a glimpse of just how deep the cultural divide between this rational New German Woman and her Chinese hosts is: «Andere Stimmen, die wir nicht hörten, beherrschten das Land: ‹die Geister.› Man wußte nicht, ob sie ein Gegenstand der Religion, des Aberglaubens waren, oder ob sie wirklich existierten. Man fühlte sie im Umgang mit den Chinesen, man sah die Folgen ihrer scheinbaren Existenz in jedem Hause» (152). Not only is Stinnes thrown off by what she does see and hear, but she is clearly unsettled by the belief in spiritual dimensions of human existence. She does not make room for this layer in her rational and goal-oriented undertaking.

Stinnes’s selection of primarily landscape photographs to embellish her 1929 text appears to have been «safe» (as Armstrong implies), because the human participants in the foreign landscape literally stay out of the picture, but such is not the case for Söderström’s Photo-Tagebuch, in which numerous images of people can be seen, either as clearly posed portraits or in seemingly random snapshots. In the case of human subjects, the specific nature of photography as a technology asks that a careful evaluation of the relationship between the photographer and his/her subject take place. Photographs that include people insert more obvious questions of power (who is represented, what narrative do the details reveal, with whom can we identify, whom do we pity/desire/blame, etc.), and also simultaneously challenge issues of power regarding representation that unpeopled photographs might not (who is really looking at whom in the photograph versus who has «taken» the photograph). While the original ethnographic documentary «calls for an unobtrusive camera, which attempts to position itself like the fly on the wall» (Rabinowitz 20), in Stinnes’s and Söderström’s case, the presence of these foreigners with camera in hand seems at times to thwart an attempt at objectivity. For example, when Stinnes and Söderström are attempting to filmically «capture» people in various rural and urban locations, a curiosity about the filmmaker is captured instead, with the subject stopping mid-stride to approach and gaze directly into the camera’s lens at the viewer, presenting a type of «interactive viewing [before] its institutional practice» (Rabinowitz 19).9 This curiosity about the travelers poses a challenge to postcolonial accusations of the appropriation of
and dominance over subject matter. At one point, Stinnes comments on the experience of being the target of «the gaze»:

Überall erweckten wir das Interesse der Bevölkerung; sofort belagerte sie uns und betrachtete neugierig die Wagen, denen man ansah, daß sie von weither kamen. Auf der Straße heftete sich eine ganze Prozession an unsere Sohlen; nahmen wir eine Mahlzeit in einem Restaurant ein, so standen die Leute dicht gedrängt an den Fenstern und schauten uns an. (74)

This description has turned Stinnes and Söderström into the spectacle – sitting inside a restaurant and being gazed at by a crowd through the windowpane – they become like life-size figures in a diorama. In the reciprocal roles of spectator and spectacle, questions of agency become more complicated. As far as power and control over representational modes are concerned, it is clear that Stinnes and Söderström ultimately maintain the upper hand; it is they who are taking the pictures and publishing them. And yet, within the photographic medium itself, a constant element of ambiguity allows for more flexibility in determining who is in control of the image: «By producing what appears to be a too straightforward or faithful reproduction of the photographed, the picture actually accentuates its own infidelity to a complicated and layered real» (Hirsch 118). This complicated and layered «real» has to do with those unintended individual and subjective readings that viewers take from the image, those readings that are ultimately connected to the unconscious: «The camera is like psychoanalysis. There are optical processes that are invisible to the eye: they can be exposed by the mechanical processes of photography. The camera can reveal what we see without realizing that we do, just as psychoanalysis can uncover what we know without knowing that we do: what is stored in the unconscious» (Hirsch 118). Thus, in both visual and textual representations of Stinnes’s and Söderström’s journey, despite what might be read on the surface as a plethora of imperialist/colonialist-inspired assumptions and actions, ambiguities in both image and word are revealed that present opportunities to explore the tension behind the binaries of subject/object and spectator/spectacle.

The China chapter of Söderström’s *Photo-Tagebuch* opens with a few photographs of street scenes, including the image of a beautiful dragon carved into a stone wall – the same type of facade that blocks the bourgeois interiors to which Stinnes so insistently seeks visual access. The next four photographs center on the parade of what looks like a house being carried through the streets. What the travelers initially think is a wedding turns out to be the procession for an execution. The spectators watching the execution are the subject of two of the four photographs, and the accompanying text (by Stinnes) expresses wonder that this macabre spectacle would serve as entertainment
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(tea and cookies being sold, etc.). The spectators of the execution are not aware of, perhaps do not care, nor can they control the fact that Söderström is photographing them, but one gets the distinct impression, based on Stinnes’s comments, that the travelers are judging this macabre spectacle of death from a position of moral superiority. But the idea of the Chinese spectators viewing the spectacle of an execution as entertainment differs only marginally from the travelers’ «consumption,» «reproduction,» and «distribution» of the so-called foreign via Söderström’s *Photo-Tagebuch*, a (voyeuristic) picture book to be purchased by (Western) consumers. This point is all the more obvious in consideration of the next two photographs that follow the execution series: a woman crippled by foot-binding, sitting on a donkey, and a close-up of her exposed, lotus-shaped feet. From this perspective, the judgment of non-Western ritualistic practices (the execution) as morally reprehensible is undermined by the Western ritualistic voyeurism of the bound feet.

Chinese foot-binding practices are one of the most obvious targets of Western cultural criticism, and thus the presence of the two photographs in the series do not come as a big surprise, but asking questions of the photographs from the perspective of postcolonial criticism produces some uncertainty in our Western assumptions about the photographic referent’s lack of agency. In the essay «The Other Question,» Homi K. Bhabha discusses an ambivalence that exists within the stereotype of racial otherness. In its «dependence on the concept of ‹fixity› in the ideological construction of otherness,» (370) the clichéd nature of Söderström’s photographs of the woman and her feet reflects important feature(s) of colonial discourse, but the documentary aesthetic of the images also offers seemingly spontaneous and «natural» moments of uncertainty and ambiguity. In his criticism of both Said’s «reluctance to engage with the alterity and ambivalence» of notions of Orientalism and Foucault’s failure to probe further the «crucial bind of pleasure and power,» Bhabha suggests that the stereotype of racial otherness functions as a fetish. «The fetish or stereotype gives access to an ‹identity› which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defense, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it» (374). Bhabha’s discussion ultimately wants to shake up the binary that Said creates and go beyond Foucault’s surveillance to consider the possibility of «a form of consent in objectification» (375). Seen in this light, the photographs present a challenge to the neatness of dialectical relations of self/other and master/servant. Not only does the photograph of a racial/colonial other serve as a point of identity (or as Franz Fanon would say, «Look mama, the women’s feet frighten me!»), but we must also consider how Söderström could have taken the photograph without the woman’s complicity. In other words, «the recog-
nition and disavowal of difference [as the fetish is defined] is always disturbed by the question of its re-representation or construction» (377).

Bhabha’s shaking up of the binaries produced by colonial discourse connects to Pinney’s and Peterson’s reevaluation of postcolonial perspectives of passive, victimized photographic referents. They argue that, in a variety of ways, photographic subjects participate in the making of their images. In the two photographs of the woman and her feet, the photograph of the woman on the donkey – shot at medium distance, looking directly at the viewer – is situated above the photograph of the feet, encouraging us to look at the woman first, and then the feet. Considering the «social definition of photography,» the primary position of the woman on the donkey on the page encourages the viewer to enter into an unspoken agreement (before moving on to the feet), as explained by Pierre Bourdieu: «[T]he sitter addresses to the viewer an act of reverence, of courtesy, according to conventional rules, and demands that the viewer obey the same conventions and the same norms […]], this need for reciprocal deference being the essence of frontality» (167). With the layout of the images on the page, the viewer who first glances at the woman enters into this «act of courtesy,» and then our eyes move on to the next image, perhaps more shocking and jarring, but considering the social significance of photographic portrait, we concur with Bourdieu who states, «Like respect for etiquette, frontality is a means of effecting ones’ own objectification: offering a regulated image of oneself is a way of imposing the rules of one’s own perception» (168). [The woman] poses fully clothed, regulated, and then presents her feet for the camera, ostensibly regulating that image as well. In this case, we can ask: If the significance of exposing one’s bound feet in Chinese culture is equivalent in erotic impact to the display of a naked woman’s breasts in Western imagery, how can we know that the woman whose feet are exposed considers Söderström an equal cultural partner (i.e., one who knows the significance of her naked feet) to whom the <correct> meaning will be conveyed? Does Söderström/do we fully comprehend what the photographic referent intends in her sitting for the camera? She may indeed have a completely different set of intentions in mind (pride, vanity, economic gain), and in displaying her feet as objects of cultural significance for the camera, might we not consider her as participating in a detached performance of culture? If she indeed did receive payment for displaying her feet, does that change our assumptions of power?

What prompts the question of money is a comment made by Stinnes that clearly signals an economic exchange between artist and consumer. The courtyard of the home of Robert Müller, a German antique dealer with whom Stinnes and Söderström socialize becomes a private setting for stagings of
local cultural production, and it is here that Stinnes and Söderström negotiate the economics of their purchases: «Alle Künstler der Straße waren mit wenigen Cents für ihre Darbietungen zufrieden» (Kuball and Stinnes 164). So while the residential walls in Beijing create divisions between public and private, they also open a space in which the public and private temporarily coexist. For Stinnes, it is in Müller’s courtyard «wo trotz des weissen Mannes China in seiner ganzen Schönheit lebte» (Stinnes 153). There they would spend their evenings eating Chinese food with chopsticks, drinking whiskey, and ordering «nach Belieben beim Boy, was wir sehen wollten … die Straße von Peking zog auf den Hof ein» (Stinnes 153). While the idea of bringing Chinese musicians and actors to perform inside Dr. Müller’s courtyard might seem like a colonial gesture, the hiring of theater groups and musicians for private entertainment corresponds to similar Chinese practices. Families have engaged traditional artists to entertain at various celebrations, such as births, deaths, and marriages, for centuries (Chen 2004). Even if they condemn the practice of foot-binding, Stinnes and Söderström participate in the economic exchange of consumption and (re)production of «culture» for material purposes, just as do the various «actors» that enter Müller’s courtyard to perform. From Stinnes’s perspective, these traveling artists experience a sense of power all their own: «Ungebunden streiften sie wie die Zugvögel umher, und jeder einzelne fühlte sich als Besitzer des ganzen Volkes» (Kuball and Stinnes 164). Clearly, speaking for the performers is not a problem from her colonial frame of mind («jeder einzelne fühlte sich»), but what prompts her to envy them as «Zugvögel» who possess «das ganze Volk» might be viewed as an interesting projection of Stinnes’s own desire.

Söderström’s documentation speaks a similar language of self-reflexivity, but the unconscious nature of photographs allows for more interpretive possibilities than meets the eye. The idea of culture as performance permeates Söderström’s series of China photographs, with a number of images emphasizing Chinese «culture» as performed by various actors: we see young Chinese people dressed in costumes of animals that partially cover their bodies and faces; we see performers on stilts; we see a blind musician and his child. As much as Stinnes and Söderström order and contain the production and viewing of culture from within their Western theater (Müller’s courtyard), the photographs of «China» as reflected primarily through images of actors and performances also reflect culture as staged. The focus on self-reflexivity brings me to the consideration of the specific nature of photography as a technology, and specifically the photograph of the shadow puppet master. What is unusual about the shadow play performed in Dr. Müller’s house on the day that Söderström snaps the photograph is that the puppet Master appears to
be staging a reenactment of the Stinnes-Söderström automobile journey. As a «foreign» and «modern» narrative, the story of the journey stands in sharp contrast to the endless repertoire of traditional plays that puppet troupes memorize and perform by heart, generation after generation. In the photograph, we see a man backstage holding the cutout of an automobile against a white screen. We can also glimpse a musician drumming in the lower left corner, and assume that an oral narration of the German-Swedish automobile expedition goes with it.

At first glance, we might view the photograph as a modern representational technology (photography) capturing an ancient one (shadow puppetry). The tradition of shadow theater as a popular form of storytelling has been used for centuries to relay stories about Chinese history. Do we then relegate the photograph by virtue of its technology automatically into the realm of the modern and the shadow play into the realm of the ancient, and by extension, the primitive and the folkloric? In his 1997 study of photography in India, *Camera Indica*, Pinney cautions against automatically assuming that photography universally represents the modern: «[P]hotos are not clearly marked as «modern» because their «functions» are duplicated by so many other forms of palpably ancient representation» (112). Thus, one way of reading the photo-
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to graph of the shadow theater is as a brief moment in the long tradition of visual representation that projects an image onto a lighted surface, putting the art form that the shadow puppet master engages in on a level playing field with that of the photographer.11

Likewise, from a different time and place, Brecht and Benjamin give some perspective to this seemingly random moment Söderström captured on film. From our standpoint as Western observers, we might consider the exposed backstage of the puppet master as an intrusion into the space where the «magic» happens. In exposing the shadow players’ workspace, Söderström’s camera breaks the illusion and magic of the shadow play for the viewer of the photograph (like the destruction of «aura» for Benjamin). And yet, in exposing the backstage of the shadow play, the photograph presents to the viewer an interpretation of what Brecht claims is the essence of Chinese theater: «Der chinesische Artist spielt vor allem nicht so, als existiere außer den drei Wänden, die ihn umgeben, auch noch eine vierte Wand. Er bringt zum Ausdruck, daß er weiß, es wird ihm zugesehen» (75). While Brecht’s essay refers to Beijing opera, a similarity between the Chinese puppet master as an actor and the exaggerated gestures of Brecht’s theater players might be said to exist. Brecht’s actor on stage «bringt zum Ausdruck, daß er weiß, es wird ihm zugesehen.» The passive grammar construction of Brecht’s words produces some confusion as to who is doing what. Like the actor on stage, the puppet master – who alone performs, speaks, and sings all character parts in the often hours-long performance – is also aware of being watched. He does not look at the camera, but continues his work while Söderström photographs. Does the fact that the puppet master is not looking suggest that he knows he is being watched?

In an attempt to understand the «language» of shadow puppetry, Söderström lurks around the players and photographs them during the time in which it takes to set up the stage: «Einen halben Tag beanspruchten allein die Vorbereitungen für die Schattenspiele. Eine Bühne wurde aufgebaut, die Sonne so auffangend, daß sie für die Zuschauer die Silhouetten der aus Eselshaut geschnittenen Figuren in scharfen Umrissen zeichnete» (qtd. in Kuball and Stinnes 164). In photographing them and «exposing» the inner workings of their magic, Söderström perhaps sought an avenue of communication to these artists to which he otherwise would not have had access. For what story does the Chinese puppet master re-tell? We assume that Stinnes and Söderström had no access to the narrative of the play itself: neither spoke Chinese, and presumably, the puppet master spoke no German or Swedish. So the travelers are confronted with the story of an automobile journey (their journey?) retold in a language they do not understand. In narrating the story,
does the puppet master refer to the automobile as the «devil’s fire cart,» a common association in the early years of the automobile’s appearance in China? Is attention drawn to the fact that it is a woman at the wheel? Does this strange couple – he married, she single, but traveling together – serve the puppet master in building the requisite romantic and/or sexual tension between the central protagonists? Perhaps the puppet master tells the story that Stinnes and Söderström do not yet know themselves: that they will marry in the end.

These are questions that remain unknown, and so we must rely on the photograph itself to tell a story, and by virtue of what is represented, we can understand the photograph as offering an interesting intercultural dialogue. Perhaps in Söderström’s exposure of the fourth wall of the shadow puppet theater for Western viewers, his photograph anticipates what Chinese audiences (at least of Beijing Opera) have accepted for ages: «Das Publikum kann nicht mehr die Illusion haben, ungesehener Zuschauer eines wirklich stattfindenden Ereignisses zu sein. Eine ganz reich entwickelte Technik der europäischen Bühne […] wird damit überflüssig» (Brecht 76). As a Western artist trying to understand the Chinese artistry presented, Söderström cannot resist the temptation to peek behind the curtain. For Söderström (and the viewer of the photograph), then, it is the puppet master himself who is on stage, and it is not the story he tells, but the story of the puppet master telling a story that becomes important.

From the images of Stinnes in the chapter evoking the masculine in her knickers and bowtie, to the numerous images of Chinese ritual practices and theater performers, to the few that depict the Adler automobile in the landscape, the photographs in Söderström’s _Photo-Tagebuch_ reinforce the idea of culture as performance that, in the end, is applicable to both the foreign/other and the tourist/self. As travelers to China in 1928, Söderström and Stinnes without a doubt functioned from within a Western colonialist mindset, but to regard the complicated collection and production of textual and visual evidence of their journey as solely pursuant of a single objective – to demonstrate cultural superiority – is indeed to only consider one side of the coin. In her discussion on the cultural exchange between intellectuals and artists in China and the West in the first decades of the twentieth century, Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker explains that

it is based upon an almost overwhelming idealism and conviction. It exudes a self-confidence which can only be generated in an environment of equality. Lu Xun expresses this most effectively in his theory of «grabbism»: In «Upon seeing a Mirror,» written in 1925, he defines ‘grabbism’ as borrowing from other countries with confidence, like a master who chooses freely according to his needs and not like a neurotic who fears the loss of indigenous tradition or enslavement by what is borrowed (64).
When the Ethnographic Subject Resists

While certainly such boldness has also led to exploitation, there is a refreshing perspective to be gained in rethinking how cultural exchanges might be understood more positively. Thinking of power vis-à-vis visual representation as more complicated and multidimensional helps us to regard Söderström’s images not solely as «taking» (from) the foreign, but also enabling the ethnographic photographic subject as somehow to talk back.

Notes

1 A 1925 article on Hugo Stinnes, Clärenore’s industrialist father, makes clear just how well off her family was: «The magnitude of his property at the time of his death cannot be estimated even approximately. In any case, he ranked as the richest man Germany has ever known, and it is commonly assumed that the fortune he left behind far exceeded a billion in gold» (Kaes et al. 68). That said, he did not finance his daughter’s round-the-world automobile journey, although her ability to attain visas and claim diplomatic status on various occasions clearly did stem from her family ties.

2 These initial texts have led to numerous later adaptations and interpretations. The filmmaker Michael Kuball, having discovered the 1930 film years later in a film archive, created a documentary Die Frau, die um die Welt fuhr: Ein Auto-Abenteuer vor 50 Jahren that was produced for German television in 1980, and in 1981 published Söderström’s posthumous photo journal Photo-Tagebuch: Die erste Autofahrt einer Frau um die Welt together with Stinnes. Kuball’s discovery led to the re-edition of Stinnes’s original travel story in 1996 with the Promedia series «Frauen Fahrten,» and finally, German author Michael Winter published a biographical novel of the trip in 2001, Pferdestärken: Die Lebensliebe der Clärenore Stinnes.

3 He had worked hard to claim his professional reputation. During World War I he met one of the heads of the French film company Pathé Frère who encouraged him to become a (film) war correspondent. Having made numerous newsreels, after the war he worked on feature films for which he gained an expert reputation in various technical aspects. He filmed some of the first Greta Garbo films with Mauritz Stiller in Munich while supporting a wife and children back home in Stockholm.

4 Numerous authors have explored German colonialism and concluded that confrontation with the foreign is instrumental in helping shape German identity. See Friedrichsmeyer’s, Lennox’s, and Zantop’s The Imperialist Imagination, Zantop’s Colonial Fantasies, Marcia Klotz’s White Women and the Dark Continent, and the work of Sabine Wilke on colonialism in the literature of Uwe Timm, Ingeborg Bachmann, and Elfriede Jelinek, for example.

5 In the twenty years prior to Stinnes and Söderström’s visit, China’s shared history with Germany is marked by an active resistance to German foreign intrusion: after the killing of two German missionaries in Shandong province, Germany responds with its «gunboat policy»: the military occupation of the Bay of Kiaochow (Tsingtao) from 1897/98–1914. The Boxer Rebellion in 1900, during which the German envoy residing in Beijing, Klemens Freiherr von Kettlerer, is killed, is an attempt (with the aid of the Imperial Army) to oust all Western powers from areas of Shandong province, Tianjin and Beijing.

6 Stinnes’s detached, scientific tone in comparison to Söderström’s more personalized style can also be interpreted as an overcompensation of the conventions of colonialist
women’s travel writing described by Sara Mills in her book *Discourses of Difference*. Women’s travel accounts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were often not taken seriously or considered factual due in part to their more personal (rather than scientific) writing styles.

7 The two mechanics hired by Stinnes quit after the first leg of the journey through the Middle East due to illness and exhaustion.

8 Interestingly, Brecht never traveled to China. Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, Ken Lum, and Zheng Shengtian’s recent volume *Shanghai Modern* reveals a fascination in arts and aesthetics between German and Chinese artists precisely between 1919 and 1945, reinforcing the important Sino-German relations that existed beyond the realm of military and colonialist engagement.

9 Rabinowitz talks about one of the earliest projects in the 1890s: the Lumière brothers would set up a camera at a fixed intersection and capture passers-by on foot, horse and buggy, etc. and then inform those who stopped that they could see themselves on the evening cinema. These images were then juxtaposed with those from other parts of the world so that «Egyptian pyramids rose up on Broadway; the exotic and the mundane becoming interchangeable» (19).

10 I would like to thank Mark Graham and Ted Burger for sharing their insight on Chinese culture in relation to the photographs I discuss here.

11 Furthermore, in the history of shadow theater, the definition of what constitutes a «modern» Chinese shadow play is marked by the date 1950, once Mao’s communist leadership is established, and large cartoon-like figures made of celluloid are used to tell very short (10 minute), mostly pedagogical animal fables. The figure of the car is actually a modern motif and a highly unusual «character.» Most literature on Chinese shadow puppetry discusses the types of figures that have been made for centuries. As the mention of figures made into the shape of an automobile is absent, so we can assume that the cartoon images that first appear in the 1950s are probably similar to the puppet cut-out of the automobile in their simplicity. Söderström’s documentation of the art of shadow puppetry as capturing potentially what he sees as a traditional and folkloric expression is actually the representation of the art form in one of its most «modern» manifestations (Chen 2004).

**Works Cited**


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