

REVISIONIST HISTORY



Huang's cityscapes in Chaotianmen (above) and Jiangbelcheng II (opposite).

History Images By Sze Tsung Leong
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China's economic explosion, for all its benefits to a hardscrabble citizenry, is destroying much of that country's visual heritage, if not erasing its history. Countless urban neighborhoods and historic structures are being razed to make way for massive construction projects that have no discernible cultural character, their architecture a sort of coy postmodernism. In *History Images*, Sze Tsung Leong examines this great leap forward in sad, meticulous detail. The best of his large-format images capture the moment between old and new, when half-built skyscrapers sprout from fields of debris formed by dismantled traditional buildings.

Tiny, ancient bricks litter the foreground in Leong's expansive views of luxury apartment complexes, the new, more distant buildings blanched by smog, as if they were less real than the older ones they've displaced. Excavations for foundations reveal an archaeology of organic growth, layer upon layer of infrastructure, while dense webs of rebar define the contours of buildings soon to come. In gutted interiors, stray personal objects hint at lives expunged, while in new ones walls of seamless concrete assure the same exact space for everyone. The very sameness of these dwellings is an odd artifact of China's new wealth, as if it took a measure of capitalism to deliver on Communism's promise.

In their visual density, Leong's cityscapes invite comparison to the urban images of Robert Polidori or Edward Burtynsky. But while those photographers' work has a decorative veneer, Leong's is less colorful and more complex. In ages hence, historians will find just as much to study in it as curators will.

—R.H.



