



Poppy Sebag-Montefiore

TOUCH

Between 1999 and 2007, I lived in China on and off. I worked as a journalist at the BBC bureau in Beijing for some of that time. I wasn't there for the job; I was there, and the job helped me stay longer. The first story I covered was the launch of China's first manned spacecraft. We broadcast astronaut Yang Liwei's message that cracked and fizzed back to Earth: 'All's well,' he said, as he orbited our planet alone. The good lines may have already been taken, but it was 2003 and China was transforming from a socialist into a market economy, from a developing country into a global superpower. Our news cycle turned between the thrills and promises of development and the fallout from such rapid modernisation: pollution; unequal rights for migrant workers in the cities; people beaten when they petitioned the state for compensation over land illegally confiscated and sold off by local officials. It was an epic story, but the lows were distressing. By the end of my time there, I'd interviewed so many people who were in such a state of fear that I began to catch it, and after being detained a couple of times, I was paranoid. I'd check behind my curtains when I got home.

Before reaching that point, I was having my own passionate relationship with China. Just to be awake was to absorb – the language, ways to live – like a baby learns the world. Every day

Aquinas - Heaven + Hell
can those in Heaven enjoy the
offerings of those in Hell?
- You need the suffering
enjoy your pleasure

Other Enjoys
Joy
Agnes Martin

- A De
- The Joy of

I was touched. Many times, by friends, by strangers, by the lady who swept the street by the courtyard where I lived. By the water sellers, the restaurateurs, by old men playing chess, by people I didn't know. Most I would never meet again. I was handled, pushed, pulled, leaned upon, stroked, my hand was held. And it was through these small, intimate, gestural moments that I began to get a hold on how macro changes imprinted themselves onto people's relationships and inner lives.

Touch had its own language, and the rules were the opposite of the ones I knew at home. Beijing's streets were scenes of countless gestures of touch. If people bumped or rubbed arms as they passed in the street there was no need for an apology, not even a flinch. Strangers would lean their whole body weight against one another in a queue. Everyone seemed to have a certain kind of access to anyone else's body. Shoppers and stallholders would hold on to each other's arms as they negotiated with one another. People would pack in together around a neighbourhood card game. In the evening, women would hold each other in ballroom embraces as groups waltzed on street corners.

Touch in public, among strangers, had a whole range of tones that were neither sexual nor violent. But it wasn't neutral either. At times, yes, you'd be leaned on indiscriminately because of lack of space, or to help take some weight off someone's feet. Yet other times you'd choose people you wanted to cling on to, or you'd be chosen. You'd get a sense of someone while haggling over the price of their garlic bulbs and you'd just grab on to each other's forearms as you spoke or before you went on your way. Touch was a precise tool for communication, to express your appreciation for someone's way of being, the brightness in their eyes as they smiled, their straightforwardness in a negotiation, a kindness they'd shown.

I felt buoyed and buffered by this touch. I sometimes felt like I was bouncing or bounding from one person to the next like a pinball, pushed and levered around the city from arm to arm. If the state was like an overly strict patriarch, then the nation, society or the people on the streets were the becalming matriarch. This way of handling each

other felt like a gentle, restorative cradle at times. At other times all the hands on you could be another kind of oppressive smothering. But usually touch was like a lubricant that eased the day-to-day goings-on and interactions in the city, and made people feel at home.

I wanted to document this unselfconscious touch. To keep hold of it. I could tell that this ease between the bodies of strangers might not survive rapid urbanisation. This touch was so visual, so visible. I freed my camera from the head-and-shoulders interview shot and took it out to the streets.

A few weeks ago I found a tape of video footage that I'd labelled TOUCH 1 and shot in Beijing sometime between 2005 and 2006. Low sunshine glows pink-gold on people's faces. An open-fronted clothes shop blasts a techno beat out onto a giant pedestrian street near the centre of the city. There's a long queue of customers waiting to go inside. My camera is on the closeness between the people standing in this line.

I focus on two men in particular. One is older, perhaps in his sixties. He's wearing an army-style jacket and grey woolly hat. In front of him is a man probably in his forties; he's wearing a mauve jacket, spattered with tiny flecks of yellow paint. These two men are leaning against one another. Neither notices particularly. The man in khaki now bashes into the man in mauve several times as he turns to look at how the queue has grown behind him.

They get closer to the front of the queue. I move with them and the music booms louder, a heart pumping, like a soundtrack from the inside of the body amplified onto the street. The man in mauve starts to bop. B-boom, B-boom goes the music, left-to-right goes the man in mauve. Each time he steps to the beat – he's dancing, he's keeping warm; he's standing sideways in the queue – his right arm bumps into the man in khaki's belly, repeatedly, rhythmically, again and again. The man in khaki doesn't flinch, he's welcoming it as much as he doesn't acknowledge it at all. He's comfortable. Watching, it now seems to me that it's impossible that these two men don't know

each other, in fact they must really be quite close: friends, workmates, family even. Most likely they are father and son. Just as I'm about to fast-forward the tape to skip to the next vignette – the two men get larger – I'm approaching them with my camera – their faces fill the frame, and I hear myself ask: 'Where are you from?'

'Hebei,' says the man in mauve.

'Hubei,' says the man in khaki.

Hebei means north of the river, and Hubei means north of the lake. These are provinces about six hundred miles apart.

'How do you know each other?' I ask.

Their voices overlap:

'We don't know each other,' says the man in khaki.

'We don't,' says the man in mauve.

Up a dingy staircase, above the Lucky House Mini Market on Shaftesbury Avenue in London, there is a traditional Chinese medicine clinic. Dr Fan is in his sixties, he left China about thirty years ago and tells me, when I'm back in London, that this touch I'm describing is a rural way of being together: the touch of peasants. I've struggled to find people in Beijing to think about this touch with because it's so obvious to them they can hardly see it. But Dr Fan tells me, as he pummels the sole of my foot with his knuckles, that intellectuals and the ruling classes have always kept a respectful distance from each other, have always been more self-contained. During the period I lived in China – that time of mass migration and urbanisation – Beijing was a city of villages piled on top of and around each other. Dr Fan said it was true that under Mao everybody did come physically closer to one another. Especially within the sexes, men with men, women with women. Mao sent people from the cities, the 'educated youth', down to the countryside to learn from the peasants. Maybe all hands that know each other's work, know each other.

Touch is an important part of China's traditional medical practice. Doctors feel their patients' wrists for six different pulse lines to make a diagnosis. Massage is used for preventative health and as a cure. Pressure points on the skin relate to specific internal organs and touching them releases toxins and reduces inflammation. Once I had stomach cramps on an eleven-hour boat journey from Shanghai to an island in the East China Sea. A lady on the next bunk, whom I'd never met before, took my hand and found the acupressure point that corresponds to the uterus and began to press it for me. Gradually the pain dulled away.

Yang sheng 养生 means 'nourishing life'. It's an active pursuit of health through the medical arts – massage, exercise, food. Think wellness – if wellness was less about gym memberships and spirulina shots, and more about a set of ancient ideas for how to cultivate your body's energy to improve your health and sense of well-being. It's combined with a fear for your life because of the lack of health-care welfare, and the necessity not to be too much of a financial burden on your one child in your old age. When I lived in Beijing, *yang sheng* wasn't so commercially inflected among the older, urban generation. It was a bodily intellect, a tuning-in to the needs of the body: at times carefully considered, at times instinctive and ingrained. It's what brought people together for ballroom dancing in the evening, and exercising in the park together in the morning.

In many ways this kind of coming together on the streets to attend to the needs of the body felt like a form of resistance to the state, a complicity among people. Although this kind of solidarity may in some ways have been made possible and encouraged by socialism, taken into people's own hands, it felt like a form of personal autonomy. In a place heavy with censorship, where published and broadcasted words can't necessarily be trusted, this was a public sphere of the senses, a way to feel one another out. Being together like this was also a way to derive pleasure and vitality from each other, without asking or taking anything from anybody. Instead, it's a reciprocity, an openness, an attention to a personal need.

I remember the first time my boundaries dissolved to accept the confident, unselfconscious touch of a stranger. I was standing in the audience at a Tibetan Buddhist festival at Labrang monastery in the yellow-grey mountains of China's north-western Gansu province, and a man, probably in his eighties, came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. I turned round affronted at first, then bemused. He didn't even look at me but craned his neck over my shoulder towards the show. I saw that his grip around me meant nothing to him but to be able to stand and see without toppling over. He was using my body as if it was part of his. Once I'd checked out whether there might be anything sordid going on, and realised there wasn't, I remember I couldn't help but feel delighted by having this man hang on to me. I was a bit ecstatic about it. An elderly man could use my body to help him stand and see. And it was lovely. I made my friend take a photo of us from behind and from the front. My face is beaming. It could be compared to the invigoration you get from standing in front of a painting that you love. But this touch is more powerful: it can happen at any time, often when least expected, and it's personal – the medium is another living being. It gives you something of Freud's 'oceanic feeling' – when the baby doesn't know the contours of its own body, before the ego, when it's one with everything else.

I sometimes wonder if there's a shadow side to this touch. If the accessibility of everyone's bodies can be mistaken by those with power as a right to them. Could it be partly why local officials can be quick to hire thugs to beat petitioners as a way to deter them from complaining to the 'higher-ups'? Does the easiness and informality between people encourage corruptibility among officials, leaning on other leaders to sway them?

At that time, touch in China between friends and peers of the opposite sex, of all ages, was restrained, almost taboo. If I tried to hug or kiss my male friends as we parted, they'd be embarrassed and squirm away. But within the sexes, friends and colleagues,

especially younger ones, would lounge all over each other. Women would often walk with their arms linked. Guys would walk with their arms across each other's shoulders. Men on construction sites would sit on one another's laps.

Platonic touch had its own erotics. It imbued you with a direct hit of the love, energy and camaraderie that you get from friendship. Perhaps touch between friends was partly set free, and came to the fore, because sexual touch was prohibited by the Communist Party under Mao. Sex was confined to marriage, and even then wasn't supposed to distract from the love for the revolution.

Among the older generation, who grew up under these ideas, couples are fairly formal with each other physically in public. When I spoke to older people sitting by Beijing's Back Lake about the kinds of touch they shared with their spouses in their homes they were matter-of-fact. Sex was sex, one lady told me, it never involved kissing. An elderly man told me of his relationship with his wife: 'I rub her back, she rubs mine.'

In a bestselling Chinese short story of the late 1990s, 'I Love Dollars' by Zhu Wen, the narrator, also a writer called Zhu Wen, decides the best thing he could do for his father, who is visiting him in the big city, would be to help him get laid. Zhu Wen muses: 'Thinking about it, I realised Father was a person with quite a libido, just that he was born a bit before his time. In his day, libido wasn't called libido, it was called idealism.'

The sense I had was that the mainstay of physical, intimate life for the older generation in Beijing was felt on the streets.

After I moved back to London, I would return to Beijing for a couple of weeks each year. In 2008, I went back during the summer Olympics. I'd been there in 2001, the night Beijing won the bid. A spontaneous street party sprang up. People abandoned their cars in the middle of the road. They were euphoric. They'd been accepted by the world. Now, seven years later, Beijingers seemed to

be putting up with the Games with muted acquiescence. Much of the Beijing of 2001 had been bulldozed. A modern city had replaced it. And in elaborate preparations for the Olympics, Beijing had been cleaned up. In the immediate run-up to the Games, anybody vaguely questionable had been removed. The city's Spiritual Civilisation Committee had banned certain behaviours: spitting, disorderly queuing, the indiscretions of the body. Volunteer elders were given official red armbands and a phone number to ring if there was trouble. They'd sit on stools on the pavement with a good view of their patch. The city was straitjacketed. I didn't go to the Games, but I did get out my camera to record the ways that people would touch one another. It was hard to find instances of the old touch. Now along the boulevards my viewfinder filled with the clasped hands and interlinked arms of young couples and lovers.

Touch was relocating from the street to the home, from public to private life. It was becoming privatised and sexualised. The younger generation now performed a newly liberated sexuality on the streets. They offered each other different kinds of tenderness, attention and care, sometimes with gestures that resembled the globalised, romantic Hollywood way. In 'I Love Dollars', the father reads some of Zhu Wen's writing and complains that it's all about sex: 'A writer ought to offer people something positive, something to look up to, ideals, aspirations, democracy, freedom, stuff like that.' Zhu Wen responds: 'Dad, I'm telling you, all that stuff, it's all there in sex.' Where for his father's generation there was a forced sublimation of sexuality into idealism, for Zhu Wen the new and potentially difficult ideals are sublimated into sex.

The city had sped up. People couldn't shuffle past each other in the same old ways. The new middle class had places to be. Supermarkets were taking over from street markets, where there's no bartering, or need for much communication at all, in fact customers were often on the phone to someone else. Migrant workers now lived in the city in large numbers but were usually sequestered away. They

slept in dorms on their construction sites and didn't have the same rights as urban residents. Where previously I'd barely been able to distinguish between rural migrants and urbanites, now the differences between people who'd arrived from the countryside and the city residents were striking, visible in fashions, faces, how beleaguered they were. Now urbanites kept their distance. There was a growing fear of migrants, that they might want what urbanites had. People began to talk about migrant workers as dirty, dangerous, people to stay clear of. They were untouchable.

Somehow the bland, fatigued Soviet-style rooms – a portrait of a leader on a white chalky wall, paint that brushed off on your clothes – had been a background for people to have a certain social command over their bodies. But the architecture, infrastructure and public spaces of late capitalism – sparkling malls, privately owned and patrolled, steel towers, underground trains – were all spaces that encouraged more public formality, better behaviour, more self-consciousness, wider gaps between strangers.

I went for reflexology in a clinic I used to go to in Beijing, an offshoot of a large traditional Chinese medicine hospital, and for the first time the masseur wore plastic, scratchy gloves. It's for hygiene purposes, he told me, there are so many people in the city now. Suddenly massage and acupuncture weren't the only therapies. Psychotherapy talk shows were appearing on television. Rather than healing through touch, people were now interested in sitting in a room with a therapist with strict boundaries against physical contact. As this was a brand-new profession, in the absence of a psychotherapist whose experience people could trust – some who felt they needed to understand more about their inner lives began to train to be therapists and analysts. Over the next few years, 400,000 psychological counsellors would qualify in China's main cities.

When I moved back to London in 2007 – I missed that public sense of touch. I continued to bump into people on the street. Friends walking beside me would be embarrassed and apologise on my behalf as the people I'd pushed into would be annoyed and I wouldn't notice. But soon I readapted to London streets and grew as irritable about the clamour and crush of strangers as the next person. And then I did what everyone with a sensory project did at the beginning of the twenty-first century. I went to talk to a neuroscientist.

Francis McGlone's work centres around nerve receptors in our skin called C-tactile afferents. They've only been recently discovered in humans. They lie within our hairy skin, and are particularly concentrated in our back, trunk, scalp, face and forearms. They respond to slow and light stroking. None are found in the genitals. When stimulated, through stroking, the C-tactile afferents produce pleasure. It's not a sexual pleasure, but the kind of feeling brought about by the touch between a mother and baby. Neuroscientists call this 'social touch'.

These nerve fibres are ancient, they existed early in the life of the species, long before language, and even before the receptors that tell us to move our hand away from pain. This is a sign that they're vital for the protection of life and health. In early times we needed people nearby throughout our lives to help us groom and to clear us of parasites. The reward for sticking together was pleasure.

McGlone is interested in moments when modernity overrides what he sees as evolutionary processes. He believes that we need C-tactile stimulation from birth for the social brain to develop. When I told him about what I noticed in Beijing, he said that it might be that poorer people gather together more than richer people because they rely on each other more for survival. He describes his world of science where everybody tinkers away alone to get their work done. Social distance, he says, has its uses – it allows the brain to get on with other things.

But Francis McGlone does bring people together. He runs the Somatosensory & Affective Neuroscience Group at Liverpool John Moores University for scientists and psychologists working on the relationships between C-tactile afferents and our emotional lives. He invited me to present my anecdotal observations from Beijing to the group. Jayne Morton, a massage therapist and occupational therapist for the Cheshire police force, said that my descriptions reminded her of where she grew up in the Wirral in the 1970s. Her parents ran the social club. Men would be in one room lounging on one another, and women in another room, arms linked, sitting squashed together. The men had finished National Service and needed a closeness with people who'd gone through similar things. The women, used to the men being away, spent time with friends who were also home with their children.

When the church closed down in the early 1980s, so did the school and the club. Everyone dispersed. People spent the evenings with their families. Then the Wirral became more diverse and multicultural, but without a big hub for meeting. In the 1980s, Jayne said that organising events for parents at the school had become more difficult because of higher divorce rates – step-parents and parents often wouldn't be in a room together.

This made me wonder if, when communities break apart, the relationship between the couple becomes overdetermined. Does the pressure for all the different kinds of erotics that I found on the streets of Beijing fall on just one other person? In the group, perhaps we are able to replay some of the intimacy of our infancy, the gentle touch of our mothers, that kind of care we must still long for. It makes us feel good, part of the world around us and with people we trust – even if that trust is calculated in an instant.

Francis and I shake hands as we part. We didn't touch when we met or when we said goodbye after dinner the night before. We'd spoken for hours, straight-faced, professional. But as he guided me down the purpose-built university corridor he did pat me on the back of the shoulder blade. The pat gave me the impression that he thought I was all right. It was nice.

The shock of the UK's Brexit referendum result when it happened caused intellectuals and cosmopolitans to reflect on how 'out of touch' they are. Academics called themselves out of touch, a presenter admitted that the BBC was out of touch. London was declared way out of touch. And now words are barely trusted. We're post-touch, post-truth. How will society communicate now?

Could it be that anxieties and fears are stoked when people are so far out of reach from each other – not only from establishment elites, but from the rest of the majority of the population too. Church halls, community centres have been closing down; work places with zero-hour contracts offer limited opportunities for socialising. There are few spaces where people can jostle together, to share and make the world with our hands.

Perhaps this atomisation means that some people feel threatened by the idea that immigrant groups seem, at least, to have something that the majority population don't have: functioning 'communities'. New migrants often do create expat networks for work, spaces to gather for faith, to eat, to speak native languages, live close to each other. They need each other to survive. The thing about touch is that it's visual, visible. And if there isn't enough integration then people who already feel isolated will feel excluded from the perceived closeness of immigrant communities, and then too from those bonds that enable us to come together and help one another thrive.

The most acute moments of life – birth and mourning – require us to live at increasing distance from those we are closest to. The distances and proximities at which we live from our loved ones, and everybody else, are also modulated by macro forces: economy, ideology, identity. The metropolis imprints itself onto the intimate details of our lives. Wherever that leaves us, my experiment (sample size: one) says – we aren't stuck like this. It takes just a few months in a different world of ideas and our bodies respond, adapt, and the space between us can change again. ■

