

## Through the looking glass of poverty.

The Business Times, 09.03.2012

By Cheah Ui-Hoon

What can someone living on just a few dollars or cents a day eat? How much rice, potatoes or bread, what type of vegetables would he get, and can he even afford chicken or any form of meat at all?

It's an interesting question- especially when examined visually, and across countries. Photographer Stefen Chow and his economics trained partner Lin Hui-Yi started off The Poverty Line (TPL) project in Beijing late 2010, where they have been living for the past three years, and have since photographed what the poor eat in some 15 countries.

"I've been thinking about doing a body of work that has some usefulness, and we've been talking about the concept of poverty for some time now." says Chow, a Malaysian who grew up in Singapore and graduated with a mechanical engineering degree from the National University of Singapore.

When they finally decided on how the project should take shape, Chow started by purchasing foodstuff that you could get for 3.28yuan (S\$0.61 at that time) at an old local market near the Forbidden City. He also went to the supermarkets in the city - where some things like rice and grains are cheaper.

The result is fascinating: six 'pao' (Steamed Buns), 12 bunches of xiao bai cai (Chinese cabbage), mounds of chilli and greens and so on. The collection of food ingredients - all costing 3.28 yuan each - were photographed on the pages of Chinese newspapers, so that the images of food also get juxtaposed against the news of the day; which lends another dimension to the image.

"The moment we started the Chinese project and did the first round of works, we realised we had something impactful," says Chow, whose first job as a photographer was with the New Paper, in 2006.

TPL's exhibition actually debuted in Singapore last year, at a sustainability company called Newton Circus located at Cecil Court, but only featured China. Chow is now preparing for a major exhibit of the project in April at the Photospring Chaochangdi in Beijing, one of the most important photo related festivals in China - and pictures at this exhibition will range from Madagascar to Switzerland.

TPL also won the top prize in the Photography Open Salon in Arles, France, after which it travelled to various places like Penang.

TPL is Chow's personal project, made possible by his international commissions. For his day job, he relies on media clients like The Smithsonian, Time and Wall Street Journal, and then big multinational companies like Cartier, Keppel, Shell, Applem Li Ning, Volvo and more.

He would buy between 50 to 100 items in each country, and also talk to locals to find out more about their living conditions. In New Delhi, he had the chance to talk to a group of house painters who had come to paint the apartment. "Conditions for them are tough, The most experienced painter earns no more than 7,000 rupees (S\$176) a month. We chatted about what food they bought and how they managed to send money home." shares Chow.

In some countries, learning about the local diet was a challenge. In Madagascar, because of his job, he convinced the director of the company and his driver to go to the local markets with him. "I'd check with them to see if the things I bought made sense. I did the same for many other countries. At the same time, I also made sure I only purchased food at local markets and also avoided any tourist spots,"he says, in his bid to keep his choices as authentic as possible.

As a result of the project, Chow's now become very interested with local markets at any one place. "I am always comparing the prices of staples across regions, be it potatoes, rice or wheat." he quips. One of the things that he's realised is that for many countries, for example, Australia, Europe or even India, the poverty line seems to reflect many choices and quantities of food that a poor person can buy.

And the reality of living in poverty changes from country to country. In Hong Kong, Chow found that many people who are near the poverty line are the working class folks. "They are the ones who start work early in the morning and finish only at night."

"They are certainly not jobless, but trapped in a place where prices are among the highest in the world - so these people hardly have the time to cook at home, let alone have proper sleep," he points out. He adds that for Hong Kong, he shot pictures of ready made food instead rather than raw ingredients.

What food choices has he made for Singapore, one wonders. At this, Chow and Lin hesitates, choosing their words carefully as they explain: "Singapore is one of the few countries that don't have an official poverty line. The other is Hong Kong." says Chow. But while for Hong Kong they were able to base the poverty line on research by non governmental agencies there. They have not found statistics from non-governmental agencies here yet that they're convinced reflects the poverty line.

The project has set a very different context on how he views life, says Chow, adding that his poverty line project can only educate people about the poor to a certain point. "When you are poor and life is unstable, the decisions you make about how to spend that little you have are very difficult."

He foresees TPL as a long term project, because he thinks it'll be even more relevant in the future.

*Stefen Chow's exhibition on The Poverty Line is opening in Beijing on April 21. He will be in Singapore to give a talk on 3D photography as part of the Singapore Nikon Club event at the Arts House on March 16.*



Slim Pickings: Photographer Stefen Chow and Partner Lin Hui Yi put together a series of photos documenting what the poor eat in 15 countries using chicken as the most expensive item on their food list.