

Interview: Stefen Chow

by Marine Cabos, Photography of China, 2013

Accomplished adventurer and photographer, Stefen Chow 赵峰 (born in 1980 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia) started his interest in photography when he was one of the mountaineers scaling Mount Everest in 2005. At first trained in Mechanical Engineering and then in Photography, Chow already been awarded several prizes and collaborated with international companies. He has already created a large body of works composed of a variety of genres that he particularly likes to mingle together. His continuous curiosity and desire for knowledge allow him to create each time unique series of photographs.

On the occasion of one talk for TEDxShanghai, he introduced during precisely 18 minutes – according to TED’s rules – his Poverty Line project in collaboration with the economist Lin Hui-yi. This ongoing project between data visualization and photography portrays food items from several countries that could be bought by a person living at the poverty line. Just before taking his plane back to Beijing on Monday 21st May, Stefen Chow warmly invited me to his hotel. A cup of coffee, a glass of fresh pressed watermelon, a lot of laughs, and an hour of impassioned discussion later all my questions have been answered and my curiosity satisfied.

How long do you intend to pursue The Poverty Line project?

We first started this project in 2010 with China, and when we started with China we were expected to end with China. We expected to do just one project and that’s it. I think it was people initial reactions and at the same time we were thinking how we could possibly expand the project, then someone suggested why not do other countries. So we did a couple of countries more, and then you realize that the momentum was really there.

We started doing more and the reactions that we got were even better. So we became very motivated. It almost as if this body of work collided on his own, we were just the workers, we just push along the way to make sure we keep on doing it. Certainly we are very happy doing it because I think it is a very meaningful concept that we are pushing.

I don’t think we put a deadline to it right now, simply because we also see the significance of doing the poverty line over time. As long as we get a methodology in photography and in calculations we do expect to do this for quite a while. And as I said, it is something that we are personally motivated but also because the project seems to have its own agenda.

Why have you chosen to use the flash in this series?

I guess the aesthetic initially was to show food on newspapers. But at the same time I wanted to highlight that is food that you are looking at. I see no reason why I should not make it look nicer or make it look nice. Because the pictures that you see are slightly enhanced for colours but it is not Photoshop. What I am just using is light, I don’t re-edit. So what you see is pretty much what you get.

Was it the first time you collaborated with someone else?

There was other collaborations but not as tight. We’re very happy to be associated in this project together because I think without one of us the project becomes much weaker. I think it’s a great exercise to be able to tackle with someone who is vastly different.

I’m very much a team person. I think it’s due to my own mountaineering background. Mountaineers survive and thrive in teams, we are connected by ropes, unless you are a solo mountaineer but most of them die young. I try to stay alive. As a photographer it’s actually something I’m not used to. When I first started my career I thought it was more lonely that I hope to be. So having collaboration, working with someone, makes me feel much more alive.

You said that after you created the series Chomolungma on the Mount Everest, you met a famous photographer who encouraged you to give up engineering so that to chose photography as a career. To what extend being an ex-engineer gives you a particular eye to the outside world?

Individuals background really matters if you are looking within, if you are creating a personal body of works. Whatever you have seen, learnt, experienced, all come together. In my previous life before I became a photographer I was an engineer, I was a climber, I was also a traveller. I think it comes all together and make someone different. Because when you go abroad photographing, doing what everyone else has done would make you pretty much like anyone else. It is only when you try to look within and try to see what is different about yourself.

In the end you have to be honest, I feel I cannot be as artistic as many photographers simply because my flair is different. My engineering background perhaps has given me a way to do things in a more systematic, rigid way. But at the same time, it is something I am very aware. I think that being in photography, you also see the creative process. So I like to be able to find a balance, try not to be so rigid, as well as remind myself not to be so artistic.

Do you miss your previous life as a mountaineer?

Of course, I miss the mountains all the time. I'm not completely retired yet, the last mountain I climbed is back in June 2010, I climbed Denali in Alaska and we are planning another expedition next year with the same team {the first team with which Stefen Chow climbed the Mount Everest}. It's going to be likely a long one enough to reflect on life. Doing expeditions if very important for me, not in artistic sense but just for myself.

You said that before starting a series, like a sort of archaeologist, you unearth all the relevant information you can find, meet directly the people concerned, and so fort. Yet this does not mean your photographs lack of aesthetic qualities. In that sense, they seem in-between 'factual' and fine art photography. How would you qualify your photographs?

I'm a conversationalist {laught}. I'm interested in a lot of things. I think photography is just the tool, the excuse to make it happen. I'm never a tourist that asks questions and leave, I would rather ask questions and document on it.

I believe in multi-genre photography, it is something I have learnt along the way. I grew up being very influenced clearly by some great photographers. But the thing is Cartier Bresson didn't just photograph street scenes, nor Ansel Adams confine himself to black and white landscapes. They photographed a lot more things. I think history has a way of distilling a person's work down to a very consisting body of work, because there is too much information in the past and too much information now. I think it is important at least for me to discover being comfortable in different trains of thought, and it is perhaps the best way to continue to learn.

When I started my career I was convinced that I would pursue a path which is pretty much different. I blend editorial, commercial and other genre together, and then in the end when you want to do a different body of work you have all these tools with you. I don't like to confine myself.

How did you select the people for the portraits in your series Communities?

I first started this series in Beijing and I guess my motivation was I wanted to know my neighbours; it's really an excuse. Sometimes I find that my photography comes to a very simple motivations, it's not something that has a great artistic line behind it. I went to different parts of my neighbourhood and I lit the location. I used different lights, up to ten lights. After I wait for someone to walk pass and then the question was 'I am your neighbour and I would like to take a picture'. So that became how I started doing the series. I loved it because I really started to know my neighbours. They were curious about what I was doing, I was curious about who they are.

The series which I did in France was different because I couldn't speak French, it was my barrier. So I depended on contacts, so I went to people places instead. I would have loved to set up the location, wait for someone to pass by, and engage that process. I like to set up, wait for something to happen, that's my thing. I no longer think that I can be a street photographer in the sense that I cannot leave a lot of things to chance. But I like to give it a certain sense of chance. When I engage my subjects in portraiture a lot of time I'm just talking to them.

I think that most of my subjects think they are having a conversation rather than staging for me. Usually my portraits are not very serious, there's a lot more conversation going on because I'm always curious about who I'm photographing, or even the place I'm photographing, I'm always asking questions. Being in that portrait session itself was the best time to ask questions, because as a photographer you are in command. As for the places, there are all in the same block, I was choosing the places based on a variety of criteria.

Can you talk more about your series Imperial Awakening?

It is already a project that has been ongoing for three years. Imperial Awakening is a series of landscapes taken around China that tries to put the imperial past of China with today's China. It is based on the concept of impermanence, of how if cameras where invented thousands of years ago you wouldn't get a scene like this because of how much changes has gone. What I was focusing on is the fact that what is in the picture are relics of architecture left behind by imperial influence, but what has happened around has changed. So you have tourists walking around the Forbidden City, you have a congested road around a Ming wall that was the site of a war battle in Chongqing, and so forth.

It is my own sense of impermanence. I think memory is often very short in the sense that we think of the present and think that this will last forever. Actually it has only been like this for the last ten years in the spend of five thousand years history of China. So for me that image itself is fascinating, the fact that we take a presence for granted. Again I thought it was a good history lesson. Whenever there is a new city in China I will look for where the history, where the imperial influence might be, I go there and I photograph it.

I also noticed you created a both unsettling and hilarious series on unusual food items that you can find in China called China Chow. How did you come out with this idea?

It's food I was shocked {laugh}. I was travelling in southern China and as we were eating, I started wondering 'what are we putting in our mouth?'. I think if you look closely enough you ask yourself that question a lot. It's basically close off macro shots of Chinese food, shot in a very factual way with little forms of flattery. I tasted most of it.

Do you make reference in your photographs?

Not really. I'm someone who likes current affairs and I also try not to bring myself, I don't like my ego to be in my pictures. I would rather create something that is based on something else that is really interesting. I get my influences outside art a lot of times, because I started as an engineer, I think I get more motivated by nature, by energy flow if that makes sense rather than what people have done in the past. I am educated in arts but I think I get more energised by something I have never seen before.

What do you think of the current state of Chinese photography?

I think that Chinese photography is expanding and progressing rapidly, you give it a slice of five years it's changing so much. Compared to American or European photography Chinese are still finding themselves, it is this formal experimentation which is very exciting. It seems compartmentalized at the moment, as an artistic photographer you can't be seen doing something else, but there are no topics that Chinese photographers wouldn't dare not to touch. So it's a very exciting phase.

Techniques have improved tremendously over the last few years. I think it's very similar with the psyche of the society. To me most of the works out there are made to make money whereas contemporary photography in more traditional fields in America and Europe, photographers did not start off that way, they did not create a body of work that was meant for collection, they made a body of work due to some frustration within or because they had something to say, and then it becomes a movement, and then it becomes valuable. I think Chinese photography is discovering itself but having said that many of them will grow up to be very established artists, it takes time.

You talk about an exciting phase in Chinese photography, is this why you decided to settle down in Beijing?

Before I was in Beijing I was spending most of my life in Singapore. Singapore is nice but I had to move on. I also lived in New York in 2007, I felt that for the rich history of New York the scene simply wasn't accepting new photographers. In an ironic way the thinking is very conservative, there's a rotation of very few artists.

When I first entered into Beijing in 2008, it's crazy, you go to gallery you see some very good photography and some that you don't even understand and I find it very exciting because everything has a place. For that reason I did chose to come to Beijing, it's one of the most exciting places to be right now.

How about Shanghai then?

Shanghai is exciting too. The similarities between the two of them are definitely stronger compared to the rest of the world. The debate within the two cities are always vigorous, and it will stay that way. However, the two metropolises are rising fast and far away from anyone else.

What are you favourite Chinese photographers?

I love Wang Qingsong. I love Lu Guang the one who photographed the pollution of China, it's hard-core documentary photography, very difficult but very well done. There's Quentin Shih that I love a lot. Zhang Xiao, very new but very exciting photographers.

It's a good representation, I think that documentary photography is somewhat neglected in the contemporary world but Lu Guang has shown what an impact it can do on a social and artistic level. I say that because there's a lot of conceptual thing up there, everything is going toward conceptual {laugh}. Perhaps there's a photography renaissance, I'm not able to put a direct finger on it but perhaps it has come to point where photographers need to think for themselves instead of recording what's out there, collectors prefer that way, but I can't be too sure of that.

What are your expectations for the future?

I'm actually quite happy with where things have gone so far. The Poverty Line series has given me a lot of satisfaction, I think it's a body of work that has educated myself a lot and others as well Educating myself has been a huge revelation. I do want to create works that are useful, that are beyond being just aesthetic, perhaps to go back to my initial roots that are photo-journalism and photo-journalism is about information. I do want to create future bodies of works in that sense. I think this is my contribution to the mix.



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