

**Beyond Cultural Eulogy and Temporal Elegy: Situating Zhang Kechun's *Yellow River***

**Photo Series in the Visual Culture of the Yellow River in the Post-Socialist Era**

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In 2013, Zhang Kechun (b. 1980) exhibited his first photo series *Yellow River* 北流活活, which took him four years to complete. Nominated by Bohnchang Koo, this project soon received international recognition and won the Discovery Award at the 2013 Rencontres d'Arles, France.<sup>i</sup> This series consists of forty-nine photos which were taken in the cities, townships, villages, and less cultivated lands along the Yellow River. The photos primarily depict either artificial or intrinsic landscapes, and some frame human activities in minimal scales. W.J.T. Mitchell claims that, "Landscape is a natural scene mediated by culture. It is both a represented and presented space, both a frame and what a frame contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package."<sup>ii</sup> The modern and contemporary visual and textual elaboration and appropriation, carrying human wills, exploits and overshadows the ontology of the Yellow River.

For a long time, the Yellow River, known as the mother river of China, and the land along it, called the Yellow Earth Plateau, have been tightly associated with sociocultural, ethnical, spiritual, geopolitical and historical metaphors and allegories. It was given the personification as a loving mother, a cruel ruler, or a tough survivor. In short, it plays an important role in the formation and function of an imagined organic community and an imagined organic continuity which together construct the awareness and consciousness of China as an entity on multiple levels. Whereas in Zhang Kechun's photography, the cultural symbols are diminished, and the imagined engine is put into reality. His creative works reflect a postmodern and post-socialist view on the society and individuals' state of being.

Without reliable textual references dated back to the ancient time, the recently coined personification of the Yellow River as the "mother" river tentatively lead to two effects in modern and contemporary Chinese intellectual and popular culture: an imagined organic

community and an imagined organic continuity. Nature has been long gendered in Western culture, and, arguably, less clear-cut in East Asia in the same sense. Common terms include “mother” earth, “virgin” forests, and “raping” wild nature, to name just a few.<sup>iii</sup> The terms clearly connote the sexual dualism in Western thoughts, namely culture versus nature, masculine versus feminine, and so on.<sup>iv</sup> What is in common transcontinentally, however, is to intentionally build the biological connection between women and nature, and consequentially to endorse both an artificially assigned social role, a “natural” nurturer.<sup>v</sup> In the Chinese case, especially when the image of the natural nurturer encounters the long circulated mythology of Nüwa, a goddess known for creating mankind from earth and water, a mother or something beyond— a more generic concern for the “motherhood” or “motherly”— comes out. Furthermore, as scholar Wang Ban writes in a specific case study, “Figurative language, rich in organic images of nature and the body, enables Lu Xun to envision the collective body of the people.”<sup>vi</sup> The “mother” river, like Lu Xun’s giants, fabricates “the mythical past to the Chinese race, from the race to the people and nation.”<sup>vii</sup>

Therefore, during the time when nationalism and patriotism was needed, cultural landscape, as part of cultural nationalism, was exploited by associating the nature with cultural symbols and metaphors, and eventually making the nature cultural symbols and metaphors. This was seen as early as in the midst of the Sino-Japanese war, which later appeared in Cultural Revolution propaganda to glorify military achievement as well as the codified party history, and came back during the heat over “root-seeking” during the 1980s, although the last might be more grass-root based compared to the top-down elite politics in previous decades. Cultural symbols of this kind functioned to form an imagined community – namely political entity, nation-statehood, sense of

citizenship and localism, self-identity in midst of uncertainty, and voluntarism over national responsibilities – through building a virtual bloodline derived from the “mother” river.

The Yellow River is never merely some nature of ontological features and utilitarian artifice. Sites along the river and the river itself have been an important cultural landscape with important cultural symbolism codified within. Moreover, the anthropomorphic metaphor assigned to it and the persona derived from the metaphor, for instance “mother river,” further coin gender, family and social roles onto the river. In Zhang Guangnian’s (1913-2002) *Ode to the Yellow River* (1938), which later became lyric of the *Yellow River Cantata* (1939), it is written, “Alas, the Yellow River! You are the cradle for the Chinese! Five-thousand-year civilization, started from you; countless heroic stories, took place beside you! ...The heroic sons and daughters, are to take you as the model, to become as great and as strong like you!” Later, in 1972 and 1973, the best oil painters in China were designated to create large-scaled oil paintings inspired by different chapters of the cantata to create a visual narration of the Sino-Japanese war centered on the Yellow River. Among them, Chen Yifei (1946-2005) created *Ode to the Yellow River* (1972), and Yan Guoji (1944-2000) painted *Song of the Yellow River Boatman* (1972). In Chen Yifei’s painting, on the left is the Great Wall winding its way along the contours of the mountains; on the right is the degraded and eroded Yellow Earth Plateau; in the middle are the swift currents coming right from the Hukou waterfall at which Zhang Guangnian was inspired by the sublime scene. A red army soldier separates the picture into golden proportions, leaving more space in the direction that the soldier is facing. A line of swan geese, bathed in sunshine, is flying toward the East – an obvious cultural reference for the Long March as well as the lofty ambition. Besides the assignments based on the cantata, other artists also found the Yellow River not only being framed as a cultural landscape but also framing human activities to better wrap the visual

narrative in a preset spirit of the Yellow River. For instance, Ai Zhongxin (1915-2003) painted *East Journey along the Yellow River* (1959), Chen Zhongzhi (1935-2008) *The Eagle of the Yellow River* (date known, before 1961), which was used as a diplomatic gift to North Korea in 1960, and *Sons and Daughters of the Yellow River* (1978) by an anonymous artist. In 1981, Shang Yang (b. 1942) painted his graduation project *The Yellow River Boatman* (1981) which is rendered in a mixed style combining socialist realism in postures, brush works, and themes, with a hint of German expressionism in its decorative monochrome and geometric composition.

The lyric in Chapter Seven “Defend the Yellow River” of *Yellow River Cantata* writes, “The wind howls and the horses neigh. The Yellow River is roaring! The Yellow River is roaring! ...Defend the homeland! Defend the Yellow River! ...” Why is saving the river as urgent as saving the people and country? And how does the river “roar?” Recalling Li Hua’s (1907-1994) monochromatic woodblock print *China Roars* (1935) on which a tightly tied, blindfolded, naked captive is roaring and trying to reach out for a knife, a gesture showing his attempt to defend. Firstly, by adding certain persona to the river, the river represents and present the more abstract and imagined community of the nation-statehood and the people as “citizens.” Secondly, the persona appointed to the river shaped the formal and aesthetic features of the river and people’s interaction with the river as the subjects in visual arts. These features include the swift currents, the roaring waves – whose early depiction could be traced back to Ma Yuan’s (1160-1225) *The Yellow River Breaches its Course* in his *Water Album*.

Art critic Li Xianting (b. 1949) wrote one of his most famous articles, *This Era Is Waiting For A Passionate Big Soul* in 1988.<sup>viii</sup> Li writes that art will be lifeless outside its cultural context.<sup>ix</sup> The artworks championed and praised highly by the big soul art critics are Ding Fang’s (b. 1956) *Yellow Earth Plateau* series (1986-1987) which celebrates the spirituality of the

early civilization along the Yellow River. The treatment of the brushwork and color clearly reminds the viewers of Chen Yifei's creative work of the Yellow River. Nevertheless, both Li and Ding expected a big soul organically growing out of the essence of its cultural context, whose strong extended roots would reversely hold and reinforce the ground.

While the cultural symbols and metaphors contribute to forming awareness and consciousness of nation-statehood, such necessity, functionality, timeliness, and persuasiveness have been fading irreversibly in the era of marketization that values individual competitions, innovation and many other things that lead to individual achievement and success. Voluntarism-motivated and campaign-driven art-making was first overshadowed by the avant-garde art in rapid turnovers during the 1980s, the introduction of commercial galleries in the 1990s, and the interfering funds that quickly forged a domestic and international contemporary Chinese art market after 2000.<sup>x</sup> As Critical Art Ensemble indicates, "The idea of community is without doubt the liberal equivalent of the conservative notion of 'family values' – neither exists in contemporary culture and both are grounded in political fantasy."<sup>xi</sup> And art historian Grant Kester comments on art in the 1990s and post-millennia, "There is, of course, good reason to remain skeptical of essentialist models of community that require the assertion of a monolithic collectivity over and against the specific identities of its constituent members, and those who are seen as outside its (arbitrary) boundaries."<sup>xii</sup>

Therefore, in three ways Zhang Kechun reframes the Yellow River of long symbolic tradition in a more present tense. His attempts serenely detach the multilayered cultural symbolism and personification. By doing so, the Yellow River is freed from its singular and fixed interpretation and comes back to its intrinsic value for future artistic creations of all kinds. Zhang first targets the visual stereotypes of the Yellow River in the composition to remove the assigned spirituality

and persona; the artist then deconstructs the uniformity through the feeling of alienation amongst human activities, and between human activity and the nature.

If vertical lines imply power and strength, curvy lines tension and trend, then horizontal lines rest peacefully in a pictorial composition and show tranquility, passiveness, as well as vulnerability. Most photos in the series show an emphasis on the horizontal lines. In the untitled photo (Fig. 1), the picture is divided into roughly two equal parts with sky in the upper and water in the lower, separated by a thin stripe of river bank in between. The sky is cloudless and grey, while the waves are mild and spread horizontally. This horizontal panel appears in almost every photo such as the grassland, the tombs, and the fire on prairie. In Zhang's photos, the horizontal lines belong to the nature while the vertical lines to the manmade – the wind power plants, the scaffold, the fake mountains, the pier and the last photo of the series, the city full of skyscrapers.

The uprising and powerful vertical structures belong to the industrialization, urbanization and the present. The Yellow River is never scarce of uplifting verticality due to the numerous waterfalls such as the Hukou Waterfall implied in Chen Yifei's work. In contemporary works such as Feng Yanjiang's submission to Xitek's "New Talents 2015" competition, *The Soul of the Yellow River* (2015), the Yellow River is full of curves, as shown in its nickname Yellow River of nine bends, which extends to the mythical faraway in searching of the mythical origin of the river and the nation. In Zhang's photo series, the Yellow River finally calms down from the hypomania state corresponding to its assigned persona and personality. And from this point, a blank space is created for future artistic creativity.

Secondly, cultural alienation is shown in the photography, which results in a discrete cultural uniformity, contributing to the imagined community. The *Buddha's Head* (Fig. 2) is used for the catalogue cover. The grey ground dominates the foreground and the middle ground, on which

traces of truck wheels and piles of coal identify the location as a mine site. Far in the middle ground are a few one-floor concrete houses which are possibly company-owned dormitories. In the background, a light grey shadow, like ink wash, outlines a mountain. Left to the center is a gigantic terra cotta Buddha's head left unfinished. The main features of the Buddha's face are shown, such as the almond shaped eyes looking down calmly and peacefully, and the extended earlobes which are both key to include as "the 32 Signs of the Great Man." However, the uṣṇīṣa is only structured with iron wires. It is placed on a simple wooden platform with no sign that it is still under construction. Right to the Buddha's head is a man in a white shirt and white hat examining the unfinished piece with his hands on the back – the typical posture of army sergeants, principals at school roaming the hallway and policemen patrolling the streets. Told by Zhang Kechun, this area is full of mine sites. One of the mine owners saw something glowing on top of the Helan Mountain and thought it as a message from the Buddha. He quickly converted and left his business, so his mine owner friends commissioned a giant Buddha to honor him. This head under construction is abandoned in the middle of a mine site due to its imperfection. However, this is an area where many Muslim people reside. Zhang Kechun captures the moment when a Muslim man is looking at the abandoned Buddha's head. When one sees the photo, the first reaction is usually "This is wrong." The word "wrong" has two nuances here: to be inappropriate and to be awkward – historical, cultural and religious symbols are alienated from their human interactions.

Given the religious sacredness, one would not expect to see part of a noticeable sculpture of the Buddha's head left unfinished and abandoned easily without any efforts to dispose it to some more unidentifiable state. Moreover, the unspoken conflicts in this photo are between the Muslim community and the Buddha's head, the infamously inhumane mine industry in China

and the owner's conversion to the religion calling for kindness, and the industry and the Helan Mountain full of national pride in the background. As *Man Jiang Hong* (1133) attributed to the Southern Song military figure Yue Fei salutes to Han general Huo Qubing's achievement, "Let us ride our chariots through the Helan Pass; There we shall feast on barbarian flesh and drink the blood of the Xiongnu."

Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, tries to "give a name to photography's essence."<sup>xiii</sup> Barthes introduces two terms, *studium* and *punctum*, with *studium* referring to the cultural information learned<sup>xiv</sup> and *punctum* the "accident which picks me (the viewer)."<sup>xv</sup> In *Buddha's Head*, the *studium* is the industry, and the two imported religions, Buddhism and Islamism together bounded by Helan Mountain, symbolize geopolitical borders and military force, while the *punctum* is the unseen but easily sensed conflicts, intolerance and alienation. The culturally harmonious community has been forever an imagined utopia. The *Buddha's Head* was taken in Ningxia, one of the places where the Dungan Revolt (1862–77) was initiated, resulting in a recorded more than 20 million deaths.<sup>xvi xvii</sup>

Coincidentally, photographer Yan Ming took a photo of the Buddha's head from almost the same angle and distance, which was used on the cover of his book *Country of Ambition* published in 2015.<sup>xviii</sup> Unlike Zhang Kechun's practice, Yan Ming's photo is monochromatic, with an emphasis on the subject. The photo is horizontally divided into three panels with different shades of grey. The Buddha's head occupies the center, half-revealed behind piles of coals. In the back, the Helan Mountain is clearer than that in Zhang Kechun's photo, and the texture of the bare stone is shown. The Buddha's head seems to be sinking into the coal. Compared to the stillness in Zhang Kechun's *Buddha's Head*, Yan Ming's subtle movement of sinking implies irreversible change in progress. He names the photo series in the book *I love*

*Such Romance That Tears Fill My Eyes*, because the sinking Buddha's head allegorizes the Mappō of Buddhism and the imagined spirituality in the past. Yan's imagined "cultural roots" are being destroyed, while Zhang disregards and even denies to show the bonds in the first place. Compared with Yan Ming's *Buddha's Head* and the entire photo series, Zhang Kechun's is, in Fredric Jameson's terms, characterized by "a lack of affect," "loss of historical consciousness," and "collapse of critical distance."<sup>xxix</sup>

In an interview with Photosc.com, Zhang Kechun recalls his first experience with the Yellow River in 2008, that when he walked on the bank of the Yellow River, all metaphors and anthropomorphosis of the river flooded into his mind, such as "the mother river," "cradle of the nation," and "origin of the civilization."<sup>xxxi</sup> He wanted to walk along the river once more just for the purpose of walking, seeing and thinking. Furthermore, Zhang Kechun's statement in his catalogue book indicates, "saying that it is a song is a joke. Saying that it is our mother river or the root of our souls is deliberate oblivion... This project came to my mind after I read Zhang Chengzhi (b.1948)'s novella *River of the North*. Once along the way, the stream of reality swept the river from my mind. The river of legend is no more."<sup>xxxi</sup> In the interview with Wall-Art, Zhang Kechun explains the terra cotta Buddha's head, the dragon, as well as other "elements of China" and the potential implication of orientalist taste by saying, "Although I wanted to avoid having orientalist hints in my photos, those objects were just there objectively and inevitably. Then I realized that I was not only shooting photos of the river, but also of China."<sup>xxxi</sup> At the end, the "orientalist" components do not create a contemporary national mythology, or concretize the imagined "China" through exotic otherness; rather, they frame the loss of the myths and alienation of the myth from the reality in such a calm but decisive tone.

In forming the nation-statehood, the role played by the organic continuity is as important as the organic community. Time instruments are placed in many public spaces such as the Big Ben in London and the two sundials near the Temple of Heaven in Beijing. In *Remaking Beijing*, Wu Hung writes that the digital screen clocks counting down the retrocession of Hong Kong and then of Macau took over the symbolic value and the distribution of time, "With its exaggerated size and appearance of a legal certificate, the Clock reasserted the schedule for Hong Kong's return and expressed the determination to realize this goal by any means, including military intervention. Located in Tiananmen Square, it sent out signals from the heart of the Communist political machine."<sup>xxiv</sup> In terms of the shared time, or time in general, many scholars in China and also other areas in East Asia have been very into the conception of the evolutionary timeline derived from theories like Social Darwinism. Two timelines exist: the global track where China is on a spot behind countries of the First World and wants to "link up with the tracks of the world,"<sup>xxv</sup> and the domestic evolutionary timeline that supposedly has gone through different types of societies defined in Marxism and leaped to socialist society, which can be seen in state-run museum arrangement and captions.

In recent past, talking about the Yellow River, no one could skip the mini TV series the *River Elegy* broadcasted on the central TV station twice in 1988. Divided into six episodes "In Search of a Dream," "Destiny," "A Glimmering Light," "A New Epoch," "Sorrows and Crises," and "Azure," the documentary delivers a message loud and clear: un-modernized China can only save its dying culture through modernization and westernization, because developing along China's own timeline meets a dead end and the country should merge into the timeline with the global track. It is emphasizing temporal rather than the cultural aspect because the series establishes a primitivism versus the present dichotomy, and it assigns a fateful ending because

the extinctive culture belongs to the ancient glories and stays behind in a singular-resulted track, as shown clearly in “Destiny.” This is the finale, rich in its implications, that is exposed to us on the television screen in Episode Six that the Yellow River flows into the ocean and meets surging billows of azure blue. *River Elegy*’s irresistible power resides precisely in its capture, in stark aquatic imagery, of the intensifying crisis consciousness that a failing urban reform inevitably triggered.

The apocalyptic mood of late 1987 and 1988 found its most convincing embodiment in the recurrent images of the turbulent floods of the Yellow River. And, from the reformist point, what other image but the open expanse of the Pacific Ocean—a symbol of the indigo myth of modernity—can provide an ultimate exit for the river and, metaphorically, for those “descendants of the dragon” in search of a new dream? There is little ambiguity over who should assume the new cultural authority. Nowhere can one find a better prescription of such a privileged role than that in the last episode, “History, however, created a very unique species for Chinese people—the intellectuals... The weapons that could eliminate ignorance and superstition are held in their hands; they are those who could conduct a direct dialogue with maritime civilization; they are those who would irrigate the yellow earth with the fresh sweet spring of science and democracy!”<sup>xxvi</sup> In other scholars’ view, the manipulated semiotics, rather than the genuine mimesis, picked from the dichotomous East versus West, are deliberately to create “an oppositional and supplementary other.”<sup>xxvii</sup> In either way of interpretation, the traditional Chinese cultural fetishism is targeted and criticized, and the river – the “cradle of the nation” – has lost its nurturing function because user of the cradle – the nation and the people – now has grown up, is not to be limited by the cradle and necessarily to learn the living skills of the twentieth century.<sup>xxviii</sup>

This movement extends to the film industry in the 1980s by the fifth generation of directors, such as Zhang Yimou (b. 1951) and Chen Kaige (b. 1952). The filmic representation highly accords with the style seen in Ding Fang's painting with excessive use of monochromic coloration, namely yellow and red, referring to the Yellow River civilization and the invented word "China red." This "Oriental's orientalism," or self-eroticization and exoticization, is defined as an "exhibitionist" approach, which means by maximizing and even exaggerating the "to-be-looked-at-ness," such as the female body under male gaze, and the most unrealistically detailed and ridiculous rituals, the director questions to which extent the root-seeking can go.<sup>xxix</sup> Thus, in quite a few films directed in the 1980s, such as Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (1988), the audiences are exposed to an obsessive amount of yellowness, redness, rituals, superstitions, pseudo or authentic traditions, and other things a novelty hunter would like to see (Fig. 18). Chow quotes Esther C.M. Yau's writings on *Yellow Earth* (1984) that the film was made in an era "when China becomes a phenomenon of the 'post.'"<sup>xxx</sup> If there is the "post-," there must be something staying in the past. Like the River Elegy, as Chow puts it, "It is also a 'China' exaggerated and caricatured, in which the past is melodramatized in the form of excessive and absurd rituals and customs."<sup>xxxi</sup>

The project is titled *Běilú Guōguō* 北流活活 before adopting the plain and even ethnographic translation "Yellow River." *Běilú Guōguō* is from the song *The Duke's Bride* collected in the *Airs of the States* dated back to 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE.<sup>xxxii</sup> It eulogizes the beauty and wealth of a bride, who is originally the princess of the Qi State, on her way to her politically benefited marriage with the king of the Wei State. The bride, along with her servants and maids, stops at a place where the Yellow River flows northward. *Běilú* means that (the Yellow River) flows northward, while *guōguō* is the onomatopoeia of the rapid currents.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Titling the project *Běilú*

*Guōguō*, an enduringly popular line of lyric sung for roughly three thousand years, the photographer identifies himself with the marrying princess who saw and heard the river. He also identifies himself with numerous people in history singing the song when they took the water route. It seems like he has joined the history and people in history by seeing what the historical figures saw and hearing what they heard. The multi-dynastic three-thousand-year long durability allows it to be passed from one to the other and defines itself as communicational resources that can transmit information beyond the bounds of interpersonal contact.

However, the way in which the young photographer of the twenty-first century joins the history is not to erect another mark onto the timeline, but to share the ontological feature of the river – the sound and the look of the river – and that is how the series is named. As written in the preface of the catalogue, “it is a river; it is just a river that, like all other rivers in the world, flows after the gravity.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> Thus, *Běilú Guōguō* is drained out of its historical connotations and comes back to the ontological features of a river, not a timeline: it flows in a direction (*běilú*), with a loud sound (*guōguō*). When the Yellow River is exempt from its duty as a timeline, or an evolutionary timeline that is either the Chinese part of the global timeline or the Chinese timeline before it merges with the global mainstream. The former nuance is conveniently explained by scholar Zhang Zhen who claims that during the era of market economy in consumerist China, one of the mantras is *yu shijie jiegui* which means “linking up with the [rail] tracks of the world” and shows “China’s desire to catch the last train of global modernity” and to “finally overcome a perceived time-lag between itself and the West.”<sup>xxxv</sup> Hence the latter is franked clearly by *River Elegy*. Visually and technically, two features in the photo series counter play the temporal connotations and the metaphor of a timeline. First, Zhang shows the co-existence of the non-melodramatized rituals and customs with the industrial, rendered in the ambiguous color of grey,

pale yellow and other non-primary colors. Secondly, by having absence or marginalized human activities in the compositions, Zhang avoids an ethnographic study of the populace and the state of being, which easily embodies momentality and timely message.

Zhang Kechun recalls that he was riding a bus from Mt. Shizui to the Black Sea in Inner Mongolia when he saw a group of people interring the deceased. By the time he got off the bus and returned to the site, the group had gone, leaving a new tomb with plastic flowers on top, among the numerous almost identical old tombs in the boundless open graveyard extending to the horizon defined by factory buildings and a smoking chimney. The color of the tombs is brownish grey while the sky is neon-greenish yellow, which looks unhealthy and unnatural. The new tomb is brighter than its older companions but it will merge into the scene very soon. The shape of the tombs and the nature of the tombs are like the depiction of and rationale behind the pyramids in the *River Elegy* episode. Recall that at the beginning of every episode, it shows people of the Yellow Earth Plateau bowing to the deceased during the funeral ritual. In Episode Three, the Egypt is made into a parallel with China for both having an ancient civilization that were once the most advanced in the world. The pyramids of Egypt are shown, in the overcoloration of yellow, and the voice over starts to explain how this similarly yellow civilization was conquered by Alexander the Great, who was from an “azure tradition.” Moreover, the funeral possession and the custom of natural burial resonate the anti-modernization stubbornness in films directed by the fifth generation directors. The only difference is the factory plant in the back, indicating the co-existence of the traditional rituals which are not yet dead and the industrialization. Thus, when yellow culture meets its azure counterpart, the fusion does not result in green, a secondary color that often symbolizes sustainability and hope, or in azure, if the

yellow civilization can transfer its entire ideology and system. The outcome is a very dirty grey. It is blurry, ambiguous, and stifling.

While what is thought to be left on the supposedly ended timeline metaphorized in the form of the Yellow River, continues and coexists with what is thought in the new era and on a global timeline, the new old, new traditions, new leftovers and new ruins appear. However, the marks of the transition and change, in Zhang Kechun's photos, are not treated with dichotomous interpretation between the old and the new, the good and the bad, the right and the wrong. In the photo (Fig. 3), a gigantic reinforced concrete natural draft wet cooling tower is compositionally in the middle, leaving about one fourth bare ground in the bottom. Bare trees in front of and beside the cooling tower indicate winter. In the foreground are three manmade deer, probably made from stone and colored differently. The largest one is bright white, with antlers, and standing with his neck straight up. A smaller light gray one, probably female, is sitting in front of the standing deer, looking at the dark gray smallest deer. They may be designed as a family. The white mist coming out of the cooling tower descending slowly, forming a veil which is thicker on the top and more transparent toward the ground. The veil nevertheless softened the picture, making it mysterious and romantic. Needless to say, it is aesthetically beautiful, almost editorial and falls in the arena of fashion photography, like that of Katerina Plotnikova's<sup>xxxvi</sup> and Sirli Raitma's.<sup>xxxvii</sup> The mist, the lines of the bare branches, the wet greenish gray concrete giant, the very culturally and religiously mythical and beloved deer, the loneliness and the awkwardness all contribute to the almost surreal air of Zhang's photography.

However, as mentioned, Zhang's *Yellow River* series consists of candid rather than posed pictures. Then if so, who would place stone deer by the cooling tower? And for what reason? From the 1950s to mid-1970s, during Mao's period, Chinese cities were transformed into the

“uniform, standardized landscapes of mixed industrial and residential compounds,”<sup>xxxviii</sup> which made the state-run, relatively big work-unit into a miniature city, “offering residents spaces for work and for play, for home life and for neighborhood life.”<sup>xxxix</sup> For a work-unit whose production involves the usage of large cooling towers, it is not surprising that it owns or owned residential area and had such a homogenization of landscapes where “industry and other functions ... were mixed together in close spatial proximity.”<sup>xl</sup> Now, at the time Zhang took the photo, the reform had already been taken, evidenced in the abandoned deer sculpture – once a site for recreation or children’s playground.

Zhang Kechun was born in Chengdu, the city based on which director Jia Zhangke (b. 1970) made the film *24 City* (2008), a film on a state-owned company-based community torn down for the construction of commercial residential buildings.<sup>xli</sup> The bankruptcy of the company and the layoffs showing the the end of the theoretically egalitarian life lived by those holding an “iron rice bowl,” and the possibility of “plunging into the ocean.”<sup>xlii</sup> Thus, the dramatic changes related to not only top-down socioeconomic structures but also bottom-up life styles are depicted in the photo, rendered in a poetic and almost editorial way. Instead of simply minimizing the dramatic and the potentially melodramatic, Zhang dominates the photo with beauty even without “aesthetic depth.” The candid looks artificial and posed. The obvious *studium* gives way to easily ignored *punctum*.

Last but not least, regarding the absence and marginalization of the human activities, Steve Edwards’ writings on photographer Martha Rosler who shot a series of city scenes absent of human beings and human activities, could shed some light. Edwards comes up with an interpretation that the absence of human activities actually invites the viewers into the photographed space to participate and occupy through imagination. Therefore, a relational space

between the frame and the framed, the framed and the viewers, and photographed and the viewers is built.<sup>xliii</sup> In Zhang's photo series, avoiding human activities or traces of ongoing life is the subject and focus of attention that separates him from many photographers conducting ethnographic studies on the local. The state of being, including all the *studium* reflected from it, inevitably shows momentality and temporality. Also, photographers like to capture striking visual conflict by showing the socially marginalized – the disagreement between the state-claimed big environment and the invisible individuals, the conflicts between the planned infrastructure project and the forced changes in life, etc. For instance, *Yibing III* in Nadav Kander's *Yangtze – The Long River* (2011) series looks like the prototype or at least inspiration of a photo in the *Yellow River* series. However, clearly, Kander, more like a cultural anthropologist, took the photo because it shows a state of being at a specific time.

Saluting to Zhang Chengzhi's novella *River of the North*, Zhang Kechun set his mind on a pilgrimage to the sites along the Yellow River from which the people, the ethnicity and the nation emanated. Coincidentally, there are two "screen snapshots" in Zhang Chengzhi's novella – the two favorite photos taken by the girl traveling with the protagonist, an unnamed young man simply and generically addressed as "he." Described by Zhang Chengzhi, "She saw a touching scene: blood red sunset glow dyes the clattering river in which the waves rolled in rigid fringes and clashed violently. In the middle of the composition was a half-naked man with broad shoulders and open arms. He was running toward the boundless, gigantic river. She smiled with nerve but pressed the shutter button with confidence right at the moment he jumped into the Yellow River." Another photo liked in the novella is described by the photographer, "At the bank of Huangshui River, I took a still life photo – the broken colored pottery that we put together. In the background is the young populus cathayana grove." There is no common English

name for the *populus cathayana* because that tree is specific to China, like the broken Neolithic pottery which are recognized by the protagonists as part of the Majiayao Culture.

The two photos in the *River of the North* could be read in many ways. In the first photo taken from the back of the unnamed young man, the protagonist inherits the devotional spirits from the Yellow River boatmen, the soldiers, and the unseen early dwellers in Ding Fang's works. The human figure jumping into the yellowness, the redness, the violence, the hardship is the personified community which, mediated by the protagonist, finds its roots. The second photo is about the collective memory of time, or collective imagination of time. The author writes, "The colored potteries are more than four thousand years old ... He gazes into the distant Huangshui River and the mountains, and realizes no wonder the world has been mysterious. Forests became bare hills, and river banks are now high plateau. From the ancient tombs destroyed by the rain, colored potteries are now flowing along the ditch like a river."<sup>xliv</sup> Here, it is not simply the geographic changes over time and ancient dwellers' experience with that, but it is the contemporary eyes looking at the traces left in the geography, and the contemporary mind imagining generations of ancestors experiencing the changes. Thus, the protagonist places himself as the latest generation linked with the "ancestors" by a single timeline.

Obviously, Zhang Kechun failed to materialize Zhang Chengzhi's envisioned originality, aboriginality and spirituality. For sure, it is not the young photographer's false either due to his limited conception or skills. Rather, Zhang Kechun's photographs well fit into his own era and living environment. No matter if it is the ideologically driven campaigns and movements up to late 1970s, or the high culture leap and economic projects in the 1980s, the collectivism, voluntarism, creation of dichotomy and opponents, and the self-motivated agency dominated the arts and culture. The fondness for symbolism and arts as illustration to supplement textual

messages were prevailing. It is the more fully implemented marketization, academicism, and professionalism that eventually leads to a sense of discreteness not only in the visual expression but also part of the art scene. It is Zhang Kechun's treatment of the cultural symbols, metaphors, and allegories associated with the cultural landscape that weaves his work into a larger cultural and sociopolitical fabric different from the previous decades. Maybe when the imagined organic community and imagined organic continuity are disillusioned, we are able to live in the present and in reality.



Fig. 1. Zhang Kechun, *Yellow River*. 2013, Photography, size varied.



Fig. 2. Zhang Kechun, *Yellow River*. 2013, Photography, size varied.



Fig. 3. Zhang Kechun, *Yellow River*. 2013, Photography, size varied.

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- <sup>i</sup> “News: Discovery Award 2014,” Les Rencontres Arles Photographie, last modified July 13 2014, accessed December 19 2014, <http://www.rencontres-arles.com/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&VBID=2UNJA475TC1&SMLS=1&RW=1325&RH=600>.
- <sup>ii</sup> W.T.J. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 5.
- <sup>iii</sup> Jane Moeckli and Bruce Braun, “Gendered Natures: Feminism, Politics, and Social Nature,” in *Social Nature: Theory, Practice, and Politics*, ed. Noel Castree and Bruce Braun (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc. 2001), 112.
- <sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.
- <sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.
- <sup>vi</sup> Wang Ban, *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 70.
- <sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.
- <sup>viii</sup> Li Xianting, “This Era Is Waiting for A Passionate Big Soul,” in *Era of Criticism: Selected works of Chinese art critics in the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century*, ed. Jia Fangzhou (Nanning: Guangxi meishu chubanshe, 2003), 366-371.
- <sup>ix</sup> Li Xianting, “*Shidai dengdai dalinghun de jiqing* (This Era Is For A Passionate Big Soul),” 366-371.
- <sup>x</sup> Cao Junjie, “Let It Go Rotten Sooner,” *Artron*, last modified January 13, 2014, accessed October 31, 2016, [http://comment.artron.net/20140113/n558290\\_2.html](http://comment.artron.net/20140113/n558290_2.html)  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/10/arts/design/10auct.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/10/arts/design/10auct.html?_r=0)
- <sup>xi</sup> Critical Art Ensemble, “Observations on Collective Cultural Action” *Art Journal*, vol. 57, no. 2 (Summer, 1998): 72-85, accessed October 31, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778010>
- <sup>xii</sup> Grant Kester, “Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art,” in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985* ed. Zoya Kucor and Simon Leung (Hoboken: Blackwell, 2005).
- <sup>xiii</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc, 1981), 20.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Barthes, 26.
- <sup>xv</sup> Barthes, 28.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Cao Shuji, *History of Chinese Population*, vol. 5 (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2001), 635.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Zhang Kechun did not tell the location in the catalogue. I found the location because Yan Ming took a photo at the same site and included in his book *Country of Ambition* published in 2015.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Yan Ming, *Country of Ambition* (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2015).
- <sup>xix</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Dunham: Duke University Press, 1992)
- <sup>xx</sup> Yan Ming, born in the 1970s, is roughly a decade older than Zhang Kechun. Wu Hung discusses extensively about the 60s and 70s-born artists’ reaction to the rapid development, urbanization, changeability in urban and rural landscapes and the loss of the tradition and nature in the “People and Place” section in *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video From China*.  
Wu Hung and Christopher Phillips, *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video From China* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 2004), 30-34.

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- <sup>xxi</sup> “Life Is A Big River: An Interview with Zhang Kechun,” *Photo Sichuan*, last modified August 18 2014, accessed December 19 2014, [http://photosc.sctv.com/ft/201408/t20140818\\_2044325.shtml](http://photosc.sctv.com/ft/201408/t20140818_2044325.shtml).
- <sup>xxii</sup> “Zhang Kechun,” *Les Rencontres Arles Photographie*, accessed December 19 2014, [http://www.rencontres-rls.com/C.aspx?VP3=CMS3&VF=ARLAR1\\_52\\_VForm&FRM=Frame%3AARLAR1\\_100&LANG=English](http://www.rencontres-rls.com/C.aspx?VP3=CMS3&VF=ARLAR1_52_VForm&FRM=Frame%3AARLAR1_100&LANG=English)
- <sup>xxiii</sup> “I Am Obsessed with the Feeling of Being on a Journey: An Interview with Zhang Kechun by Wall-art,” *Wall Post*, last modified August 3 2014, accessed December 19, 2014, <http://www.wallpost.cn/article-5745-1.html>.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Wu Hung, *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 113.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Zhang Zhen, “Mediating Time: The ‘Rice Bowl of Youth’” in *Globalization*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Duke University Press, 2001), 131.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Wang Jing, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 118-136.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Chen Xiaomei, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 28.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 167, 252.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Rey Chow, 85.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Rey Chow, 145.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> “Shuoren,” The Collection of Chinese Classic Poetry, accessed December 19 2014, <http://www.shigeku.org/xlib/gd/sj305/15.htm>.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> “Zhang Kechun,” *Les Rencontres Arles Photographie*.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Zhang Zhen, “Mediating Time: The ‘Rice Bowl of Youth,’” 131.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> [https://500px.com/katerina\\_plotnikova](https://500px.com/katerina_plotnikova)
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Sirliraitma Wild Life, <http://www.sirliraitma.com>.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Piper Rae Gaubatz, “Urban transformation in post-Mao China: impacts of the reform era on China’s urban form,” *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China*, 28-60, 28.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.
- <sup>xl</sup> *Ibid.* 32.
- <sup>xlii</sup> Zhang Zhen, “Mediating Time: The ‘Rice Bowl of Youth,’” 131-154.
- <sup>xliii</sup> Steve Edward, *Martha Rosler: The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (Cambridge: MIT Press Afterall Books, 2012).
- <sup>xliv</sup> Zhang Chengzhi, *River of the North* (Jinan: Shandong Art and Literature Press, 2001).