

# Going Home: A Conversation with Artist Mu Ge<sup>i</sup>

Yang Jing<sup>1</sup>

*In 2004, noticing the scale of the demolition, displacement and relocation of the Three Gorges Project, Chinese photographer Mu Ge started to focus on the living conditions of ordinary people in the Three Gorges region. His photographic series Going Home was nominated for the Foam Paul Huf Award in 2011 and selected as a Juror's Pick for the 2012 Daylight Photo Awards. Since 2013, he has been working on Behind the Wall, a new series that takes the destruction of the environment and the people's survival situation under the background of mass urbanization and industrialization in northern China as the main concern. Mu Ge's work has been shown in many exhibitions.*

Yang Jing: In recent years, your work has attracted more and more attention from critics and other artists since your photographic series *Going Home* was nominated for the Foam Paul Huf Award in 2011 and selected as a Juror's Pick for the 2012 Daylight Photo Awards. Let's start from this series. How long did you work on this series?

Mu Ge: *Going Home* was my first mature photo series. I started it in 2005 and completed it in 2010, so a work taking five years.

Yang Jing: How many photos did you shoot under *Going Home* and how many were finally selected?

Mu Ge: More than 500 rolls of 120 films, each roll 12 photos. Filled with enthusiasm for taking photos of the Three Gorges, I gave all my energy and passion to this series. In 2009, GIM Gallery published my work collection *Muge* with a preface written by Louise Clements, the artistic director of QUAD. This book collected about 110 photos from my two photo series *Silence* and *Going Home*. It went to the 61th Frankfurt Book Fair. In 2013, Jiazazhi Press, an independent publishing agency in China, published my new work collection; it collected 57 photos from this series.

Yang Jing: How did you first get the idea to take photos of the Three Gorges?

Mu Ge: My hometown Wuxi is located in the Three Gorges region. I left my home very early from the time when I went to the middle school at the age of 12 as a resident student. I did not spend much time in my hometown. After graduation from university, I worked for several years in Lianyungang and then settled down in Chongqing. From time to time, I went back to my childhood home at Wuxi where my

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parents were still living. Every time I went back home and left it again I needed to travel along the Yangtze River. In 2005, the demolition and resettlement for the Three Gorges Dam construction had already come to the end; I saw so many big changes. I started to take photos of the people and scenes on my way home because I wanted to record the people's lives in order to capture some traces of such a special period. All of these were also tangled up with my own life and memories. The photos were taken on my journeys back home. The English title was "Going Home", emphasizing the sense of on the way.

Yang Jing: You didn't directly shoot the Three Gorges Project. Your photos have abundant connotations, with deep and complicated feelings expressed through the lyric and calm images. I think it is not possible to describe that in one sentence. Could you say something about what you wanted to say?

Mu Ge: From the beginning, I was asked by somebody what I wanted to express. I reflected on my works and I felt that what I wanted to express was the normality of people's lives. The absolute ugliness and poverty was not what I wanted to present. Above all, those people in my photos have their dignity; then, I consider who they are, what they are doing, how they live their daily life, where they came from and where they are going, under the historical background of the Three Gorges displacement and relocation. I avoided using the term "reality" and I preferred replacing it with "normality". I was focused on the survival situation of ordinary Chinese people. Somebody asked me if there was any difference between my work and other artists' work. Yes, I was born and brought up at the Yangtze River. So many "first time" experiences in my life were related to this river. I remember the first time I left home for college; it took me two days and two nights to get to Chongqing by steamship. I have lived here for the past 30 years. 11 years ago, I started to shoot the people and scenes of this region when I was almost 30 years old. So, my feeling about the Three Gorges must be different from others.

Yang Jing: In one interview, you mentioned that going home was the spiritual pursuit or mental landscape of those displaced people. Their old home was to be submerged under water. Since the home was to disappear with life and memory, what does "going home" refer to?

Mu Ge: "Going home" is my journey back to hometown, not only in geographical meaning, but also in spiritual meaning. For me, that spiritual hometown was disappearing. Actually, the impoundment of the Three Gorges Dam didn't have a huge direct influence on my hometown Wuxi — only one or two towns were affected. But the more profound influence came later. The Three Gorges region was an idyllic land where people lived peacefully. The construction of the Three Gorges Project brought large changes to the local community and people's lives. Generally, there are three different views on this project. Some people welcomed the project, because the government promised to relocate them to better places and build new towns and

houses for them. Some people thought it was so bad. They used to go swimming in the river, date on the riverside and walk along the river after dinner; since the dam was built, they couldn't any more enjoy all these activities but had to stand at a distance from the river. The physical interaction with the Yangtze River was destroyed, let alone the natural disasters that came with this project. Many relocated villagers suffered, as they had to move to other provinces due to the construction of the project. Some who moved out could not adapt themselves well to their new environment chose to return to the Three Gorges area, but they soon found that they had lost the housing and land in their former hometown. Even the schooling of their children has become a big problem. As a group of people without identification papers, a normal residence permit and a source of income, it is so difficult for them to survive in this area. That has now become a severe social problem. When I took photographs of people's life situation, I didn't generalize their life as misery or tragedy. I had a very personal perspective and tried to express the real existence of these ordinary men and women.

Yang Jing: Those weary, dispirited, meditative and confused figures deserve a lengthy stare and to be remembered. These photos tell of these ordinary people's powerlessness when facing the great change. However, certain images convey a sense of hope. For example, the facial expression of the young man leaning against the side of ship conveys such a sense of hope. It is not possible to depict the meaning of these photos in simple words.

Mu Ge: You are right. The emotions I intended to convey are complicated and ambiguous, many photos don't have obvious directivity. For instance in this photo a man was standing in front of his old home demolished by a bulldozer with only the debris left. It carries such a sad feeling. Another photo, of the two youngsters sitting on the river bank and listening to music with their headphones, is relaxing and pleasing. They reminded me of what I used to do when I was a child. These people I photographed were in their own world. When I shot them, I stayed so close, maybe only one metre, to them, but they were still immersed in their own mental states, and were undisturbed. I have to let my photographic subjects stay in their normal life situations so that I can grasp the sense of existence of these ordinary people.

Yang Jing: Who are these people the *Going Home* series?

Mu Ge: Most of them were strangers. There were also my relatives and family members. For example, this picture was taken at Wushan harbor. The old harbor was demolished because of the Three Gorges Dam construction, so this one was a temporary harbor. The two people in the photo were a young couple waiting for their ship. They had to wait until eight in the evening. The weather was cold, so they picked up sticks to make a fire to keep warm. In another photo, a group of local inhabitants were doing laundry in the river. It was a local tradition that every year before the Spring Festival people went to do their laundry in the river. Most strangers

I photographed were passengers travelling along the Yangtze River. There were liners between Fengjie and Wushan, and between Fengjie and Yunyang. Like to long-distance buses, they transport people from one port to another along regular routes according to a schedule. They dock at several ports and the passengers can embark and disembark easily. Nowadays, there are no more of these kinds of liners on the Yangtze River. Most people in my photos were passengers on board. Some were migrating workers. For instance the passengers on this bigger steamship were migrating workers; many farmers went to look for jobs in Guangdong, Shenzhen, Jiangsu and Zhejiang. Some details are interesting. This young man in a suit and tie was a migrating worker. Dressing in this way tells the old Chinese tradition that people dress formally when they go on a long journey, to show the respect for the others and for themselves as well. Such old customs of good manners are being lost today with all the rapid development.

Yang Jing: In many photos the human figures were bathed in a soft and mysterious light from above or behind, so their facial features and expression became unclear. In addition, human figures and landscapes often hid in a screen of mist. Is it fog or smog? Does the reappearance of light and mist have some special meaning?

Mu Ge: In fact, many places on the Yangtze River are whole year swathed in heavy fog. So it is not smog. From the artistic perspective, light and fog endowed the photos with a sense of mystery. Fog and light have certain meaning. Fog implies an uncertainty and ambiguity. Light presents a sense of hope in these people's lives as well as in mine, to counterbalance the negative feeling. When I was taking photos at the Three Gorges area, I often felt myself in depression. Demolition and relocation destroyed our memory of the past. For example, in the future, I even couldn't show my daughter the place I was playing in my childhood, because they are already under water. In fact, since 2009, I had less and less to shoot there. First, many scenes repeatedly appeared in my lenses. Second, the reality I saw was rather depressing. In 2006, when I went to take photos for the local people; they were happy and were holding hope because they thought that their hometown were to become a beautiful modern city. Then, after several years, the situation was the same or even worse, their hope fell into a depression.

Yang Jing: Didn't the local government build new town and houses for them?

Mu Ge: If you have been there and now you go there again, you can see that new towns are built up. But in new towns, the old history and memory were uprooted and there is not the tranquil and pleasing atmosphere that there was in the old towns. In addition, often a new town puts several old towns together, so the population is much bigger and the town is crowded and noisy, but there are not enough jobs for the people. A lot of residents stay jobless in new towns and that has caused a lot of trouble. The industrial zone was undeveloped, because no investors would like to invest in this area. Agriculture is not enough to support people's lives, because the

income from planting crops is too low. Tens of thousands of jobless people stay in these towns, which has brought a lot of social problems. Many previously relocated people also returned to the Three Gorges area due to cultural or economic difficulties. I remember that Sanlian Life Week once had a discussion about these returnees' problems. It is not a problem for only dozens or even hundreds of people, but for tens of thousands. Without having a thorough investigation into it, I can't give an exact number. But the returnee phenomenon has become more and more obvious in the last few years.



*An Abandoned Home, Kaixian, 2008, courtesy of the artist.*

Yang Jing: I think the problem you are referring to is due to low-quality urbanization. In the past, even though the Three Gorges area was underdeveloped and poor, at least the local people had a peaceful and harmonious life. The villagers knew each other and helped each other. They didn't have so many connections with the outside world. Now, their original life pattern has been interrupted, but they haven't reach a better living environment. There are many low-quality urban constructions in China;

for instance, people often tear down historic buildings and replace them with tawdry and characterless new ones.

Mu Ge: Yes. And economic development also destroyed the friendly interpersonal relationships of the local community. Money and business became the main driving force of the new relationships. The strong fraternity among fellow villagers and townspeople and family bonds are all disappearing. Some parents went to make money in big city and left their children at home to be taken care of by grandparents. Afterwards, the kids grew up and became emotionally distant from their parents. Many things are beyond our imagination. The fast economic growth of the past three decades left behind a lot of social, ecological and environmental problems, but they have not been solved. Of course, under the background of the Three Gorges Project, these problems looked more intensive and severe.

I think today's China is somehow like the USA in the 1950s and 1960s. But this era will not go on forever. Maybe in 50 years, all these scenes we see today will go. This era is perhaps a good and significant opportunity for photographers. In China, if you drive from where we are now sitting, within less than 100 kilometres you see very severe pollution. The conflicts and contradictions are seen everywhere.

Yang Jing: Many contemporary photography and video works refer to social issues. This is based on the understanding of the relation between art and society: whether art can engage with a social issue or it should keep distance from the society. As a photographer, what do you think about the position and duty of artists?

Mu Ge: As an artist, I sometimes feel helpless and powerless when facing social issues. Through photography, I have an outlet for my negative feelings. But in China, most people have no channel for removing their negative emotions. The Three Gorges is only a background, as we mentioned above; my work is not talking about the Three Gorges. My work tells about the people's plight in this society. As a contemporary photographer living in this era and society, it would be a pity if I haven't focused on these social realities.

In China, photography and video, especially photography, was excluded from mainstream art. This situation started to change only years ago. For me, social engagement means how to express my idea, rather than work for market or business. For me, going out to take photos is more like accumulating life experiences which are important for me. I hope that my photos can make more people think and feel the essence. To reveal the social issues, some artists believe that we should shoot those more shocking, cruel even bloody scenes. I think they are not the norm of Chinese society. I hope I am not simplifying the social issues out of any superficial or novelty-seeking purpose and stereotypical interpretation. Presenting the reality is my responsibility as a visual artist and my way to engage in society.





*The Path of Wedding in a River Valley, Ningxia, 2014, courtesy of the artist.*

Yang Jing: The displacement and relocation of more than one million people for this unprecedented huge project in human history attracted many photographers and video artists, both Chinese and foreign. Are there still artists who are taking photographs of this subject?

Mu Ge: Almost none as far as I know. For example, I know more than 20 artists who photographed or videoed the Three Gorges, but now, none of them is still focusing on this. I still have concern about the Three Gorges. But what is the point? The Three

Gorges Dam construction is completed; those areas are submerged below water, with not even any debris left. The most important element for photography is the time. Now, the time has gone. That historical moment will not come again. Photography is under the restriction of time and place; even staged photos still need to connect to specific times and places. Through images, the photographers involved themselves in this special historical moment and left abundant materials for later researchers and audiences. In the future, more people can see the history of the Three Gorges presented by the artists from different perspectives and individual experiences. Those would be valuable source materials.

Yang Jing: Can you say something about your current project? Does it have an inherent connection with *Going Home*?

Mu Ge: I'm currently working on a new project, *Behind the Wall*. After I completed *Going Home* in 2009, I started to plan this new project; therefore it is a continuation of the *Going Home* series. I started shooting in 2013, and now it is near the end. The new series contains the photos I took on my journeys in North China. I shot the people and scenes along the ancient Great Wall from Xin Jiang to Dandong, across the whole of North China. It sounds a little like making short notes while travelling along the Great Wall. Today, we are experiencing the fast process of urbanization and we easily neglect the rural areas. The areas I journeyed through were villages and towns. I avoided the big cities. I focused on people's lives and scenes at four levels: county, township, village and individual. *Behind the Wall* includes three parts: the first part is photos; the second part is video clips automatically taken by my Carcam; and the third part is the collected sound material. The expression of this project combine photography, video and sound, it is a multi-media work.

For instance, this photo is of a classroom in a rural primary school in Gansu. The Chinese characters on the wall, the teaching utensils and the interior decoration are still from the period of the Republic of China, with nothing changed after so many decades. When I met this scene, I felt like time had frozen. Another photo is also interesting. I was driving and suddenly a piece of red paper with a written Chinese character "happiness" pasted on the cliff at the side of the road jumped into my view. The red paper appearing in such a dull and desolate rural environment triggered my interest. Later, I reached a village nearby, and I got to know that the daughter of a local family in the village was getting married, and that red paper was for welcoming the wedding guests.

*Going Home* is monochrome. Black and white photos are more like memory itself, and more abstract. I started to photo the people and scenes of this region at the end of the construction of the Three Gorges Project when the large-scale demolition and relocation were almost complete. So at that moment I was not shooting the process of demolition and relocation, but the people's living situation after that. *Behind the Wall* is coloured. As the countryside areas in northern China are an unfamiliar



landscape for me, I wish to use colour photos to record the current situation.

Although *Going Home* is somehow lyric and narrative, it is more based on observation of the reality, which makes this series a bit closer to a documentary style. *Ash* is focused on still life and landscape, and it express my feelings about my own life through some details, such as a broken egg, or a piece of wire. It is more philosophical and abstract. If we say *Going Home* is about my journey back home, *Ash* is my thinking at home, and *Behind the Wall* is again a departure from home, or to seek for my home in a broader meaning. This is the general context of my work during the past ten years.

Yang Jing: Which artists had an influence on you photographic career?

Mu Ge: From the perspective of photography, I most like a group of photographers in the 19th century, such as Peter Henry Emerson, the founder of naturalistic photography, and Eugene Atget, an important figure of surrealist photography. The photos by Man Ray, Sally Mann and Masahisa Fukase also inspired me. I majored in Film and Television Production when I studied at university. A lot of film artists, including Andrei Tarkovsky, Hsiao-hsien Hou and Yasujirō Ozu had a deep influence on my work. Another, Jia Zhangke's films also interested me. Especially his film *Still Life* influenced me deeply. I don't think that this film about the Three Gorges is perfect, but his point to involve with the Three Gorges issue was based on very deep understanding of the living situation of people. His early films *Xiao Wu* and *Platform* are really good works. He is good at revealing the living situation of ordinary people. When I was teaching at university, I read a lot about the history of photography, and that was helpful for theoretical improvement. But I learnt photography mainly through teaching myself and by practicing.

Yang Jing: What camera did you use?

Mu Ge: I used a KIEV 60 120 camera for shooting *Going Home*. It was very cheap, maybe several hundred yuan. When taking *Ash*, I used a LINHOF 4x5 large format camera. Later, I used a TOYO-VIEW 8X10 field camera for *Behind the Wall*. The KIEV 60 120 camera is small and more convenient. I didn't have high technological requirements when I shot the *Going Home* series. By the way, at that time my tight budget didn't allow me to have a more expensive camera. But I found that the cheap camera gave me more freedom from worrying about losing or damaging it when I shot at certain difficult angles and positions. Now, I do use a large format camera, and the working process is slower and thus more rational. I need to think carefully when I face the scene. In photography, the camera catches only fragmentary moments and details, so what we get might be a false impression. I need to consider if the scene in front of my eyes reflects the essence of existence, what I exactly want to shoot, and how to best express my ideas.

Yang Jing: Have you ever used a digital camera?

Mu Ge: A digital camera was much more expensive if you compare the image quality with that of the large format camera. In addition, I had a special interest in films. So, I haven't yet used digital camera, but maybe I'll try it in the future.

Yang Jing: In contemporary China, living as a freelance photographer is not easy. How did you manage to earn a living and support your work throughout these years?

Mu Ge: I partly live on the sale of limited edition photos. My series *Going Home* has two formats: five copies in small format and 12 in big format. My later series *Ash* has only one format, each work is in an edition of eight. Meanwhile, I run a photography workshop where I teach a group of students. I taught photography at university. From time to time, I also accepted commercial photography commissions. If I think of having my works collected, I more hope that my works can be published as books. Because being published as books can help to spread my works. There were no independent publication agencies in China, but now there are some. For example my work collection *Going Home* was published by Jiazazhi Press, the best independent publishing agency for photographic works. Anyway, artists need to know how to publicize themselves. Chengdu is far away from art centres, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. So artists in Chengdu have fewer opportunities for communication and exchange on one hand, but on the other they have more possibilities to focus on their own work.

Yang Jing: have your works been collected more by international or domestic galleries and museums?

Mu Ge: Mainly by international galleries and museums. Domestic collection count for only 10%, or even less. Of course, Western collectors have their own criteria for Chinese artworks. Their interest in Chinese contemporary photo and video works is related to their understanding of Chinese society; it might be not consistent with the way we see and express Chinese society.

Yang Jing: The 1990s witnessed a boom in the collecting of contemporary Chinese work. At that time, many works representing the Political POP style and Cynical Realist style were introduced to Western collectors. But if we look back, many works then had a more or less stereotypical expression of what was the reality in Chinese society. Today, it is not right for Chinese artists to follow the stereotyping tendency. When revealing the social issues, grasping the multiple dimensions and complexity of Chinese society is necessary and a unique visual language is significant. I think that such kinds of works can maintain value long-term.

Mu Ge: I agree with you. Chinese artists in the 21st century do not favor stereotypical expression. Their works carry more ambiguous, multiple meanings. For

conceptual photographers, image is only a medium to express their ideas and tell their stories. Revealing the reality of Chinese society, sometimes I feel, as a Chinese artist, that I'm observing the society from within and I might not see it very clearly. Many foreign photographers and video artists, because they are observing Chinese society from without and from the perspective of others, can often have a deeper and sharper view. Nowadays, image is developing very fast. The making and dissemination of images are so easy because digital technology has maximized the convenience of image far beyond our imagination. For example, the combination of the selfie and social media has allowed us to access so many interesting and original photos taken by common people. This, in fact, is a big challenge to professional photographers. Sometimes I think if Cindy Sherman took photographs today, what would she think and what would she do? Could she be so successful? For the young generation photographers and video artists, the time we live in has offered us a lot of possibilities as well as challenges.

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<sup>i</sup> This interview with Mu Ge was conducted on 23 January, 2017. The interview was originally in Chinese and translated into English by the author. The Chinese transcript was reviewed and approved by artist Mu Ge and kept in the possession of the author.