

An Elegy for Rivers and Mountains: A Conversation with Artist Zhang Kechun¹

Yang Jing¹

Chinese artist Zhang Kechun was the winner of the Discovery Award at the 45th Rencontres d'Arles and 2015 Contemporary Talents Competition. Zhang Kechun's elegant and tranquil photos revealed the impact of human activity on nature and the ecological deterioration in different regions of China. His two photographic series, The Yellow River, and Between Mountains and Waters, have attracted considerable media attention both in China and abroad.

Yang Jing: In 2014, your photographic series *The Yellow River* won the Discovery Award at the 45th Rencontres d'Arles. Since then, being published and exhibited worldwide, this series attracted considerable attention both within the art circle and outside it. Many online and print media interviewed you. I notice that in an interview, you mentioned the influence you received from *The Rivers in the North*, a novella by Zhang Chengzhi. To be specific, what kind of influence did you receive from this novella?

Zhang Kechun: There was more or less misunderstanding in media reports. This project started in 2010. At that moment, I was planning to go out and take photos. I started to search for all kinds of materials. *The Rivers in the North* by Zhang Chengzhi helped me to decide how to do it. One evening, sitting in bed, I read through this novella. In the early 1980s, just several years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, the protagonist, who didn't want to submit to his dull life, dreamed of becoming a geologist. To prepare for the entrance examination for the master's degree program of the China University of Geosciences, he set out on a journey of exploration of five rivers in northern China, the Yellow River being one of them. His passion inspired me. I was then at a crucial moment in my life. I quit my interior designer's career and I was also tired of working as a commercial photographer. I wanted to shoot my own project. But I was hesitating if I should abandon my job and plunge myself into the career of freelancer photographer, because this project would take me several years and cost a lot of money. The young hero in this story inspired me and helped me to make the decision to go to take photos for the Yellow River; otherwise, I wouldn't felt able to go on. This is the most significant influence I received. In media interviews, I have mentioned this. But I guess that the media had somehow misread my meaning. The writer's vivid and detailed description of the Yellow River was actually not so important to me. Later I tried to find certain sites he described, such as the flowing river of ancient pottery pieces, but I couldn't find them. After all, it is a novella, not a news

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story.

Yang Jing: How many provinces did you go to?

Zhan Kechun: I travelled to all the provinces the Yellow River flows through. I started from the Yellow River mouth in Dongying, Shandong, and made my way upriver. I went to Henan, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Gansu, Sichuan, and finally to the headstream basin of the Yellow River in Qinghai. But I didn't cover all the places in one time. With very limited financial support I obtained from a sponsor, I didn't have enough money to rent a vehicle and complete the whole journey at one time. I mainly made it by bicycle and walking. Taking Chengdu as my base, I journeyed to one or two provinces for a month at a time and then I came back to Chengdu where I could develop the films and prepare for the next journey.

Yang Jing: How long did you work on this project?

Zhang Kechun: From 2010 to 2013. I spent seven to eight months outside shooting each year, divided by several brief rests in Chengdu. That was an enormous workload. I went to some places over and over again; for example, Lanzhou is the only provincial capital the Yellow River flows through, so I went there five or six times. I total took more than 1000 photos and finally selected about 50. The cost of the large format films I used was rather high, so I couldn't take many more. I remember I first went to Shandong and took a lot pictures there, but later I found them so far away from what I wanted that I didn't select any of them.

Yang Jing: Why did you choose a large format Linhof 4x5 camera? What is the technical advantage of this camera?

Zhang Kechun: It works quite slowly, but the photos are very exquisite. I don't like that fast food style of shooting — quickly taking a lot photos in one time. Using large format films, this camera keeps all the delicate details. This is its advantage. But it is heavy, so the tripod is always needed. It is not very convenient to move it. Every time, when I saw everything was OK, I carefully pressed the shutter. I worked in such a traditional way. Nowadays, a lot of photographers use digital cameras and Adobe Photoshop, so what they need to do is just shoot some material and then deal with it on the computer. But I prefer walking to the actual place, finding the scene and taking the photo.

Yang Jing: So before you went to a place, you had already an image in your mind?

Zhang Kechun: I would never go to a place and shoot randomly. I searched the subject online and in magazines, books and newspapers and made a rough plan of what I wanted to shoot, and then I set off to meet the subject and the moment. I did a lot of homework prior to going there. But there was always something unexpected,

because you could never know what you would encounter there. For instance, this work, *A Man Pumping in the Desert*, was taken accidentally. It was in the Tengger Desert, Gansu. To water the trees planted nearby, this man had to pump water from this water pit every day. This one, *People Crossing the Yellow River with a Photo of Mao Zedong*, was the result of good preparation. I knew that in Sanmenxia, Henan, every summer some swimmers crossed the Yellow River carrying a gigantic photo of Mao Zedong, which was a local tradition. The first time I went there, there were maybe more than ten thousand visitors. It was so crowded and I couldn't find a good position for my camera. The next year, I went there again and finally took this photo.

Yang Jing: On your journeys, what impressed you most deeply? And did you have special difficulty?

Zhang Kechun: It was OK for me. My journeys were rather peaceful. I journeyed by train with my foldable bicycle, camera, tripod and films. When I arrived at the river bank, I installed myself in a small hostel. Every morning, I rode bicycle or walked to the river bank and returned to the hostel in the evening. No big problem or conflict. I think my journeys were just like my photos of the Yellow River, still and calm, though there was a flash of unrest.

This photo, titled *A Buddha Head in a Coalfield*, was taken in Yincuan, Ningxia. In the background was the Helan Mountain and there were many open coal mines. The coal was dug out and piled in this coalfield. There was a temple in the Helan Mountain. Local people told me that the temple was donated by a coal mine owner. He built a huge statue of the Buddha, but the artisan botched up the Buddha's head and it was abandoned in this field. The Buddha's head looked so bizarre in such a place. The photo exhibited was in large size, so the audience saw clearly that it was in the morning and the workers were washing the coal. Last year, Mu Ge and I again went there when we came back from Xinjiang. This was a really impressive experience. Another is this photo, *Cemeteries*. These are local cemeteries near the highway, behind which is a chemical factory. At that moment, I was on my way by bus from Shizuishan to Wuhai, I suddenly saw a group of mourners. I got off the bus and walked back to the cemeteries, but when I arrived there, the people had gone, with only this new tomb left.

Yang Jing: Were these men fishing? How could it be possible to catch fish in that pit?

Zhang Kechun: Yes, they were catching fish. This was taken in Shaanxi. Afterwards, I went there again and it was buried beneath sand. There is a big chemical factory nearby and this building is the abandoned water tower. Every year, the Yellow River floods this place. After floodwaters recede, fish are often blocked in these small water pits. That's why they were catching fish there.

Yang Jing: You were trained as a commercial designer when studying at school. How

did you become a freelance art photographer?

Zhang Kechun: Personal interest. I learned photography mainly by self-learning, such as reading books and learning online. I studied commercial design at university and I also worked as an interior designer after graduation. Gradually, I started to work as a part-time commercial photographer, and then a full-time commercial photographer. Afterwards, I completely stopped commercial photography. Step by step, I changed to art photography. Photography costs money, so when I just graduated from university, I couldn't afford this. But I managed to transfer to this field.



People Fishing by the River, Shaanxi, Archival Inkjet Print, 115×147cm, 2012, courtesy of the artist.

Yang Jing: The protagonist in *the Rivers in the North* actually highlighted the image of a strong man of that era. He and his generation, although suffering the hardships of the Cultural Revolution, still struggled ahead with their idealism. He regarded the Yellow River as his spiritual father. The description of the Yellow River was also impressive; especially those paragraphs of how he swam across the Yellow River, they really touched our emotions. This novella is a celebration of idealism and heroism and that's why this novella caused a sensation in Chinese literary circles then. It also inspired you. But the Yellow River in your work was still and pale, hiding in a screen of fog (or smog). The damaged land, eroded rocks and industrial ruins convey a feeling of desolation and sadness. What do you think is the big difference between the novella and your photos?

Zhang Kechun: Yes, as I said in an interview, first I started with a romantic feeling to photograph my ideal of the river, but at the river bank, every day I kept running into

pollution and ecological degradation. I realized that I couldn't run away from it. I believed that I should shoot these scenes. Of course I tried to do this in my own way. The unrest beneath the tranquillity was what I wanted to express. The destruction of the environment is the reality in today's China. For example, there is severe smog in Chengdu nowadays, in the past, we didn't know of that, but now we know more about smog. The construction garbage in the photo shows the construction of a high speed railway. These things have become typical visual elements, to show the problems China is facing in its rapid development. I didn't turn away from these.



A Man Pumping in the Desert, Ningxia, Archival Inkjet Print, 115×147cm, 2011, courtesy of the artist.

Yang Jing: Ruins and construction garbage have become the subjects of many Chinese artists.

Zhang Kechun: Yes, because they are everywhere and you can't ignore them. But this rapid development will not last forever; this era is soon coming to an end.

Yang Jing: I see what interested you was not the wonderful landscape along the Yellow River. Your works were not landscape photography or geographical pictures. They are about the impact of human activity on this river and the effect of industrialization on people's living conditions.

Zhang Kechun: Yes, my works related to human existence, the effects of human activity and industrial civilization on nature; however, rather than glorifying the industrialization, I wanted to convey a mangled and broken feeling. In China, the

Yellow River was considered the Mother River, a cradle of Chinese civilization. But the river was not any more lively and nurturing, and the land not fertile any more. The conflict is drastic. There are always traces of human's activity in my photos. Even in the remote source area of the Yellow River, there was an electric pole, which showed the existence of human beings and the expansion of industrial civilization. Of course I tried to tell these in a soft tone.

Yang Jing: You were focused on the relation between nature and human beings. As we can see, your photos are very broad, but the human figures within are very tiny, sometimes, almost invisible. Does that have special meaning?

Zhang Kechun: Yes, the relation between nature and human beings is in my concern. The environment we live in is an entity; even now I'm in Chengdu, far from the Yellow River, but still we are in the same country and on the same planet, nobody can escape. I like the long shot photograph, so that human figures are naturally tiny. According to my understanding, the power of human beings is nothing compared to the power of nature, even when we try to change it.

Yang Jing: After *The Yellow River*, you started another project, *Between Mountains and Waters*. How long did you work on it?

Zhang Kechun: This project is yet to complete. Both series are about China. *The Yellow River* is more like a line, which means I took photos along the river; *Between Mountains and Waters* is more like a scatter diagram — I chose some sites in China and took photos of these selected sites. One difference is that in *Between Mountains and Waters* there is a displacement — I changed my position with my subject. I set myself in the photo and asked the man who was there to come out and press the shutter. For example, in this photo, this guy standing among the mob on the river bank was me. I was both a witness and a participant. I stayed outside and at the same time on the scene. The style of the image remains like in the previous series.

Yang Jing: Where did you go to shoot *Between Mountains and Waters*?

Zhang Kechun: I've been to many places. This series started in 2014. In the past 2 years, I have been to Xin Jiang, Hunan, Jiangxi, Beijing, Hebei and Shandong. I went to many places I had previously been to. I also went to several sites in Sichuan. Until now, I have selected more than 20 photos, but this summer, I'll still go to take more.

Yang Jing: When you chose the sites for *Between Mountains and Waters*, did you have any special criteria? What were they?

Zhang Kechun: Yes. In China, since ancient times, the mountains and rivers have been a primary interest of artists. *Between Mountains and Waters* mainly speaks of how human activities have changed the landscape under such a rapid development. I

especially paid attention to the destruction of the natural landscape. On the other side, I scouted those undestroyed natural relics; for example, the Xiaogu Mountain in the Yangtze River. I found it looking same as in those old photos taken by foreign photographers one hundred years ago. I went to many famous mountains and rivers, such as the Huang Mountain, the Yangtze River and Zhangjiajie, among others.

Yang Jing: So, was there much planning and preparation work before going to take pictures?

Zhang Kechun: Yes, I need to make a plan in advance. It was impossible to cover the whole of China, so I had to be selective. For example, in the Tianmen Mountain at Zhangjiajie, I took a photo of a panorama lift built in the mountains and valleys. It takes only two minutes to go from the foot of the mountain to the top. The shape of hills at the Tianmen Mountain at Zhangjiajie is very typical Chinese; so the lift in such an environment looks so bizarre. This photo was taken in Luzhou. This broken bridge was an unfinished project, so local students were gathering under the bridge to have their physical exercise class. Working on this series, I preferred a concise visual expression.

Yang Jing: Media and critics inclined to categorize your work into conceptual photography, what do you like to say about that?

Zhang Kechun: I don't know much about their categorization. I'm neither a critic nor a researcher. My point was very simple: at the beginning of my work, I searched for some subjects and made a plan. I was not working as a journalist who ran to the site and immediately took photos. There was a concept behind my photos. My work was not documentary photos, nor landscape or geographical photos. I wanted to express my experiences and I chose photography as a medium for my individual expression. This was enough for me.

Yang Jing: Your works are about the relation between nature and human beings, and human figures appeared in most of your photos. I feel that there are several relations: the first is the relation between the figure in the photo and the environment he lives in; the second is the relation between the audience and the natural environment depicted in your work; the last but most interesting is the relation between you and the environment in the photo. In *The Yellow River*, you are only the photographer, but in *Between Mountains and Waters*, you are also the human figure in that environment. This was a transformed relationship to your subject.

Zhang Kechun: Yes, my works depicted the statues of those ordinary people in a grand environment. They were drivers, local peasants, or desert control workers, and I was one of them as well. As for the dislocation you mentioned, it was from my point of view a kind of interaction and participation; even I knew this interaction and participation might have no real function. At such a moment, people can think. For

example, some people who never pressed the shutter perhaps for the first time have had a closer look at the scene being photographed and considered his living environment. Meanwhile, when I was standing in the scene, I also regarded myself as one of those people who lived in that environment and reflected on the environment from their perspective.

Yang Jing: So there is a transformation of your role or identity: from the photographer to the dual roles of being both the photographer and the subject. This is very interesting.

Zhang Kechun: Yes, there is such a progressive meaning; it is a development compared to my previous work. Actually, I plan to make a trilogy about the environment in China. *The Yellow River* is the first part; *Between the Mountains and Waters* is the second. Then I will do the third part. It is about the Yangtze River. I plan to go to many places along the Yangtze River and on each site I take two photos. One is the river water, the other the city landscape, and the two parts will be juxtaposed in one picture. I'll choose certain typical cities along the river, from Qinghai to Shanghai. For example, I would choose today's Leshan that was called Jiazhou in ancient time. I'll avoid those kinds of very typically representative urban sites, such as the Oriental Tower in Shanghai; rather, I prefer those homogenous urban scenes, because today's urbanization brought a homogenous looking to all cities. I will make a series of photos and array them together. So finally, this work will be a single piece in the format of a scroll, just like the classical hand scrolls. Nowadays, many artists are taking photos and videos of the Yangtze River, but there is almost no single work. I would consider this work as a transitional project towards my future work.

After that, I will start a more abstract project. I will try photogram, what I talked about with Yang Yi. I will go out with enough photo paper. I plan to put the long scrolls of photo paper, maybe three or four meters long or even more than 10 meters long, into the water and get the photo by using flash from above. This idea is from the scroll format of Chinese classical painting, such as *Twelve Views of Water (Shui Tu Juan)* by Ma Yuan. I'd also like to stand under the waterfall, if it is not too big, holding the photo paper and asking my assistant to use the flash. I'd also like to go to the Yellow River in icy winter, so that I can use photogram to record the texture of the icy surface of the Yellow River, which would be so different from the Yangtze River.

Yang Jing: So that means that nature completes the photographic process and you just provide some assistance.

Zhang Kechun: Yes, it is a freer and very eastern way of expression. This is my main idea for future work.

Yang Jing: Have you ever thought of using other media?

Zhang Kechun: Not really. Photography is what I love and I'm good at. But I'll start to try video art. I think photography and video art have the closest connection with society. Because no matter how you take a photo, you are still based on the real subject, no matter if you like or dislike the reality. Photography and video art is relatively young, and there will be a lot of possibilities. Compared to easel art, I think photography and video art has a broader future. These years, I've been paying attention on the mountains and waters in China, I think the continuous concern, the continuous thinking and expression, is significant. I'll follow my plan. The rest of my work depends on the execution. The ability to execute the idea is very important, especially for photographers, because when we go to take photos, we deal with all kinds of practical issues and different people. Although I'm quite an introvert, I still manage to deal with different people in society.

Yang Jing: It's not easy to live as a freelance photographer in China. How do you make a living and support your photography?

Zhang Kechun: Well, not only in China, living as a freelance photographer is hard everywhere in the world. Of course, in developed countries, the average social wellbeing is much better, so the artists don't have severe pressures on their standard of living. Several years ago, I had to accept a commercial photographic commission to maintain a basic standard of living. Nowadays, the situation is much better, since my works are collected by galleries and museums. Now, I have some funds, so I work very hard, trying to produce more works. I sell limited edition photos. For example, every photo of *The Yellow River* series is in three formats, seven copies in small format, five in medium format and three in large format, so in total 15 copies for each photo. The Art Museum of CAFA has collected my works. My works have also gone to institutions in Canada and the USA. Recently, I've been refurbishing my studio; it's a loft, the ceiling is 7m high and the loft is located in the Blue Roof Art Zone. This book is my solo exhibition at the Three Shadows Gallery + 3 in Beijing in 2014, and there is an exhibition preface written by Ou Ning. I got to know him several years ago at an exhibition at CAFA. He was fond of my work, and later he brought me to the 2012 Yixian International Photo Festival. These years he has been undertaking his rural reconstruction project in Yixian; I visited Yixian and stayed there a couple of days. The local Hui style buildings are very nice. His work actually was about that place and the relation with the local villagers and the changes that have grown from the cooperation between the artists and villagers. Of course, as a visual artist, I think that the ability of social art to directly bring about social change is limited. The value of art more exists at the level of consciousness, triggering people's thinking from different perspectives.

Yang Jing: Yes, when I look at these works, I realize that the Yellow River through your lens looks so different from in my imagination. These photos are foreboding. The sense of anxiety and even desperation beneath the tranquil surface forces me to think about the relation of nature and humanity. This is something I can never see and think in my daily life.

Zhang Kechun: The Yellow River has a special meaning for Chinese people. Currently, most Chinese don't want to face this depressing reality of the destruction of nature. Most of them have even never thought about it. For example, this photo was taken in Lanzhou; in the background is a chemical plant, with the tall chimney smoking. Most people took this kind of landscape for granted and they were ignorant about ecological and environmental disasters. I believe that my works can trigger people to reflect more, and ultimately that can influence not only their awareness but also their behaviour.

ⁱ This interview with Zhang Kechun was conducted on 12 April 2016. The interview was originally in Chinese and translated into English by the author. The Chinese transcript was reviewed and approved by artist Zhang Kechun and kept in the possession of the author.