

LIU ZHENG

The Chinese

Liu Zheng, born in Wuqiang County, Hebei Province, China, in 1969, grew up in Datong, a mining town in Shanxi Province. He currently lives and works in Beijing. His work has been exhibited extensively abroad, including a one-person exhibition at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, 2001, and is included in the touring exhibition *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video From China*, 2004; *Strangers: The First ICP Triennial of Photography and Video*, 2003; the 50th Biennale di Venezia, Venice, Italy, 2003, and the *Chinese* at Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany, 2004.



Four Beauties, Diao Chan, 2003



Buddha in Cage, Wutai Mountain, Shanxi Province, 1998

Begun in early 1994 *The Chinese* series could well be described as Liu Zheng's biography of China through the vast populous of the Chinese Republic. With a blend of choreographed images and unprompted photographs, Zheng has effectively conceived of a visual archive of modern China akin to the laboured documentation of early western ethnographers. For *The Chinese* Liu Zheng has photographed very distinct elements of the Chinese people in order to record their altering circumstances; and by repeating his action, by photographing so many individuals from so many parts of China's vast and unruly landscape, Zheng appears to action a 'protest against forgetting' the people in the face of such unprecedented economic disruption. The British historian Eric Hobsbawm described the necessity for 'a protest against forgetting' as a way to consider something many more times over in order to remember it, and Zheng's series of photographs effectively immortalise his subjects into history.

The Chinese reads like a vast visual encyclopaedia to the most densely populated country in the world, as Zheng's candid images of prosperous landowners, transsexuals, performers, discarded fetus and the poor, are evenly lit, each deserving of as much attention, in order a concord of lasting photo-images is accumulated. Specific to the Deutsche Bank Collection, are six compelling acquisitions that merit a re-examination of the entire body of works. Examples from the series include, *The Chinese* series is *Untitled* photograph, Qigong, Beijing, 1996, is of an elderly man dressed in traditional Maoist uniform, protruding from the darkness, in what initially might appear as a moment of rage; (as his hands are held aloft), on closer inspection suggests a man in idle contemplation, practicing the formative steps of Tai Chi before lights go out. Likened to the

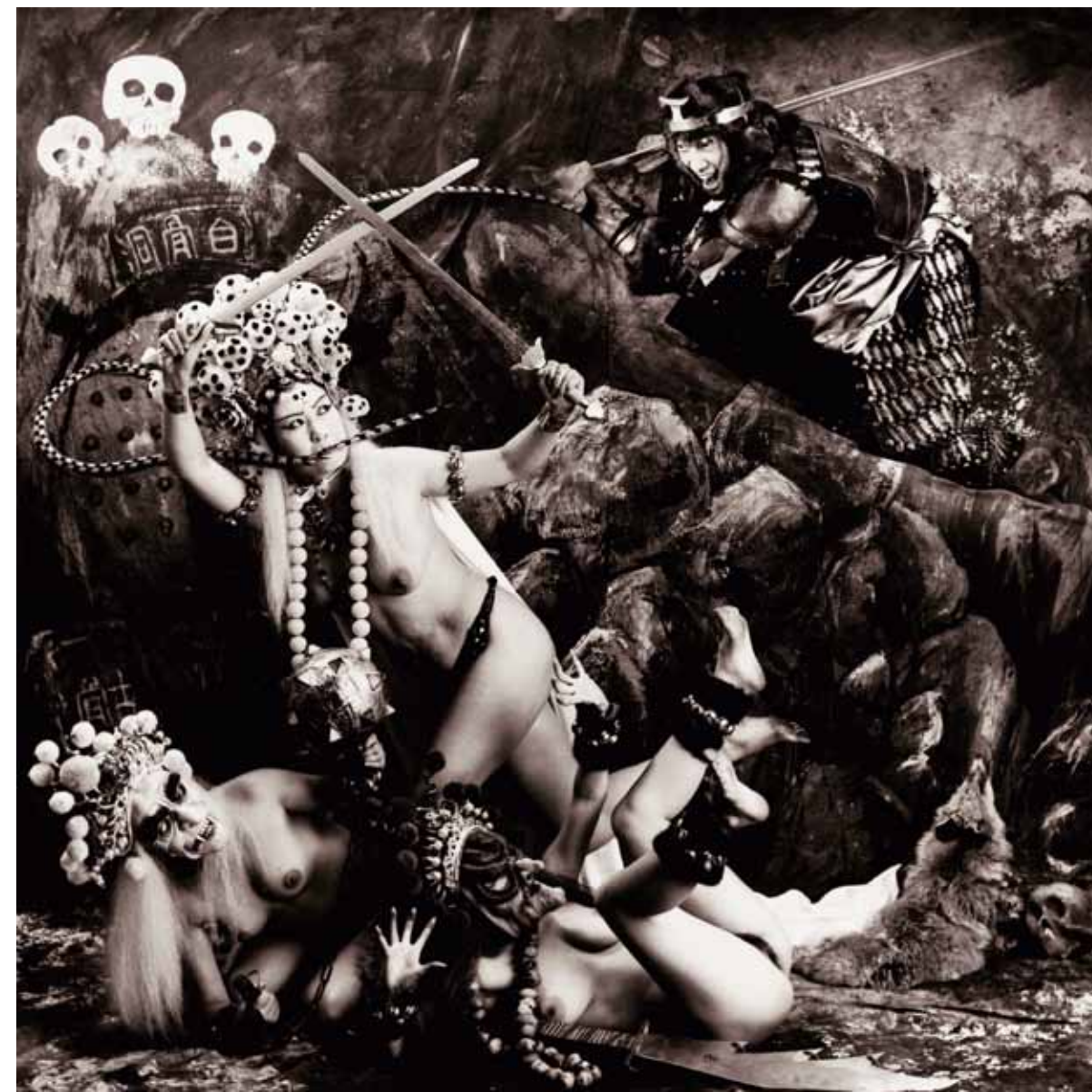


Muke Village, 1998

oeuvre of a number of images, Zheng appears to have choreographed this scene, in order that the resulting image sits evenly within the frame, and he succeeds in encompassing the spirit of a man in unfettered meditation. Like so many of the elderly in China, this man is without lavish attire, dressed simply in a black pullover and a dark canvas jacket and flat-cap. For Zheng his allure is not in his appearance but in his inner strength; his measured breathing and composed posture.

Zheng's *Buddha in Cage*, Wutai Mountain, Shanxi Province, 1998, is more observation than animation, as a large marble statue of Buddha is photographed at the very edge of the precipice, against a thick curtain of fog. The seated Buddha is encased in this rib-caged casket is held aloft by two bamboo beams, that if removed might see the statue topple over the ravine.

Captured in a moment of utter isolation, the devotees have since dispersed and this elegant monument is in the process of transition to the village below, Zheng's image subtly alludes to meditation as something other than of one's own choice; as much incrustation as freedom of will. *A Flower Boy at the Roadside*, Daqing Mountain, Inner-Mongolia, 1998, has Zheng on the very edge of China, in Mongolia, for which the landscape is vast and un-tethered. Where the photographer appears to have encountered a flower-boy, either by chance or design Zheng has the boy pressed against this idyllic scene of open prairie, the clouds rolling over the horizon. A little perturbed by his new role as a



Quelling the White-Bone Demon, 1997

figure in a picture the boy clasps onto these rather unkempt flowers, as he comes to realise that Zheng is not interested in buying his trade but wishes instead to make him the subject of his photograph; as an opportune sale for the nomadic boy becomes something else entirely.

Two Old Clowns, Dita, Beijing, 2000, recalls something of the vivacity of early Chinese Opera. Two elderly figures, (faces painted), of ambiguous sexuality appear to wrestle one another as they positively fall into Zheng's lap. The smaller of the two figures, standing against an erect tent, comes across the taller protagonist, caressing a paint-brush that could well lead to a canvas. Dressed head-to-foot in the traditional regalia of Chinese theatre, the two dated and dishevelled clowns muster a smile for the camera. Zheng's photograph manages to capture something of the regal history of China, when the dynasty's reigned and the 'age of one thousand entertainments' flourished. Yet for all the majesty of such recollections, the crest-fallen embrace of his two made-up clowns suggests the closing moments of a piece of Chinese history; as traditions have become supplanted by a fuel for modernity and grand economics, as China is in the hands of the industrialists now.

In context, for much of the 1990's Liu Zheng worked as a committed photojournalist for the *Chinese Workers' Daily*; a simplified Chinese language newspaper. It was whilst entrusted with his role as a journalist that Zheng appears to have had a revolution of his own, that would alter his



Four Beauties, Wang Zhaojun, 2003

perception of reality. Exposed to every element of the Chinese social strata, such circumstances impressed upon Zheng the resolve of the Chinese, who in spite of their candor for the camera remained anonymous to the outside world. Recording the truth was a means to comprehend the greater good of the people. Apolitical, the action was a deliberate breach of the rational for image-making, and in particular photography in China. Tellingly The Chinese series was initiated whilst Zheng was still committed to the newspaper, and it was the subsequent accumulation of his photographs that was to preoccupy him more substantially and subsequently liberate him from his political ties.

Historically Zheng's moment was a time of great social and cultural change, in which China's leader, Deng Xiaoping had opened up the economy to foreign investment; orchestrating a daring and unprecedented system of change that allowed free enterprise to grow and flourish under the all pervading eye of a one-party state. During which time peasant revolt was replaced by well-educated, professional technocrats, and revolution was replaced by economic evolution. For Zheng this critical shift from the sustainable economics of the countryside for the potential wealth of the cities had him return to those citizens most affected by the suitors for modernity. Powerless, penniless and of little intellect, Zheng's portraits are of those who appeared to have absorbed political and cultural traditions at the expense of their own self-worth. Tellingly Zheng's photo-works critique a modern China that has arrived at its zenith at the expense of its people.

Zheng's formulaic approach had his figures all appear within a square frame. Initiating a series of photographs, it was obvious that he had decided upon a work of some importance. Dates, times, seasons appear irrelevant in these encyclopedic photo-images of men, women, children and the elderly, captured in unruly poses.

Historically Zheng's photographs can be likened to the visual integrity of American photographer Diane Arbus, who also employed black-and-white



Four Beauties, Xi Shi, 2003

square format photographs in the late 1960's, of deviant and disillusioned people in their own settings; raw and unruly this was Arbus' way of scrutinizing the truth at a time when influences such as the 'beat generation' were introducing new narratives to American culture. There is a sense that Zheng was seeking something of the absurdity and fatalism of Arbus' works in his own deviant images.

For Zheng another leading light was the work of German documentary photographer August Sander, who was responsible for the defining series of portraits *People of the 20th Century*, for which he diligently and deliberately photographed whole swathes of people from the German Weimar Republic from early 1911. An apocalyptic era when men and women indulged to excess, the country was driven to ruin and reached for National Socialism. Of very different era's both Arbus and Sander were determined to reveal something of the greater truths of their monumental circumstances, and as a photojournalist and photographer Liu Zheng had such aesthetic references in his psyche, as his images appear intrinsically open and outward looking. Significantly when considering international influences, The Chinese series can be described more as photographs of an international reputation, made by a Chinese photographer, and less Chinese photography by a Chinese artist. Photography the world over has acted in a similar vein to seek a return to the real, to challenge the picturesque in painting and draw on the uncertainty of the truth.

Somewhere between American photographers Diane Arbus, dealing in the casualties of real life, and another

American Philip-Lorca diCorcia, renowned for his documentary photography, artificial lighting and pose, is where Zheng deposits his work. Photographs employing a fine balancing act between those that are more spontaneous and those that are tableau. Works that are unapologetic for their grid, from those that are subtly choreographed.

In China the history of frank documentary photography was rudely interrupted by the extended tenure of Communism. Illuminaries such as Sha Fei (1912 – 1950), Zhuang Xueben (1909-1984), and Fang Dacheng (1912 – 1937), were among the fledgling photographers responsible for early photography by design, and it wasn't until the 1990's, with the liberal exchange of trade and industry and the influx of Western influences that photography was once again open to such radical ideals that would allow for something new. Liu Zheng was among a wave of avant-grade photographers that substituted the restrictions of photojournalism for their own idealism manifest in a new publication; *New Photography* was initiated a year into his Chinese series. Zheng formally chose to distance himself from his newspaper role for something more of his own making, and it would have meant his acting more independently, working surreptitiously, without formal recognition and recognized salary.

For Liu Zheng The Chinese series is a substantial reexamination of the Chinese, uncensored and without political cause, Zheng's portfolio proves an unequivocal account of the beleaguered lives of those living in China now and when given to speaking about his mission, he positively



A Flower Boy at the Roadside, Daqing Mountain, Inner-Mongolia, 1998

describes his endeavor as something akin to a revelation. "In the process of my photographing, I have come to understand many abstract concepts, such as truth and falsehood, emptiness and reality, and gradually the division of these concepts have lost meaning to me. To me, The Chinese started from an attempt to record reality but ended in becoming a singular vision." (Liu Zheng, *On Liu Zheng's Photographs, Historical Traces*, Gu Zheng, Associate Professor, School of Journalism, Fudan, Shanghai University, China.)

In context Liu Zheng's early works include the Three Realms that appeared as a performative installation of man, ghost and god. Elemental forces, these three manifestations of man were for Zheng an operatic attempt to critique the prevailing cultural orthodoxy. It might have been said in this early work that Zheng was attempted to substitute the dry rhetoric of the republic's manifesto for something much more emotionally charged. More recently the Three Realms has been replaced by The Four Beauties that further delves into the ruthless substance of Chinese history and mythology, for a new appraisal of China. Unburdening himself of the thick historical details and any of the political polish, Zheng peels history open to reveal the ugly injustices that have been endemic of China's past; recalling his prevailing attempt at 'a protest against forgetting'. The Four Beauties specifically references four female protagonists from modern Chinese history. Xi Shi, (a political prisoner), Diao Chan, (pursued by the reigning emperor and his son), Wang Zhaojun, (married off to a foreign leader), and Yang Guifei, (an imperial concubine, beheaded for her close associations to



Four Beauties, Yang Guifei, 2003

the emperor); each draw their own political intrigue, whilst collectively they represent the impossible treachery that runs the length of modern Chinese history.

The Four Beauties series is hugely compelling, as Zheng appears to have altered his approach to image making for this seminal body of photo-works. Choreographed scenes, and Zheng's attention to detail, are here delivered as a rich tapestry of modern narrative. Figures are dressed and in a state of undress, as dynastic scenes of treachery are quite elegantly recomposed for a contemporary audience. In *Four Beauties*, Wang Zhaojun 2003, the figures almost resemble marble sculptures, as the pale near naked women appear twisted and contoured in a grandiose moment of impossible beauty. Tellingly for Liu Zheng history deserves greater attention, and in its retelling he sees an opportunity to labour over the official content; suggesting a great detail about Zheng's politics and his critical appraisal of his country's social and cultural history.

As in the lives of The Chinese, that Liu Zheng has recorded for many years previously, their lives are heavily influenced, even determined, by an unflinching faith in such dynastic fables; thus the relationship between his works is far closer than the visual content might suggest. Zheng also addressed the nature of China's early ancestral history, and specifically the integral relationship of the ruling classes and the subservient concubine. In another, *Four Beauties*, Xi Shi 2003, Zheng composed a work that appears to have a European feel to it, as the protagonists rise and descent in an extended landscape of composed figures in space.

Rewarding as much as it appears a scene of tragedy, Zheng positively introduced narrative and story-telling to image making, as the scene unfolds and each of his characters requires as much of our attention, as any of his single figures from his black and white series.

This series and his previous one, *The Three Realms* are for Liu Zheng very definitely complex reappraisals of his cultural and political history, as he fundamentally asks questions of his country that have gone unanswered time immemorial. Liu Zheng's influence on the contemporary Chinese art scene can be measured in his unbridled ambition for seeking the truth. Distrusting the apparatus of information in China; Zheng in his photography attempts to challenge the tired propaganda lead imagery of men and women at the precipice of a mountain, holding aloft copies of Mao's red book whilst reaching for the stars. In contrast unearthing of reality is closer to the gutter. Images of beleaguered figures on street-corners; devotees, deviants and the destitute are all from the underbelly of the state; as vast swaths of people largely ignored by the Chinese Republic. It is Zheng's idealism, of wanting to challenge the status quo that can be seen in the works of his contemporaries, Ai Wei Wei, Song Dong, Wang Guangyi and Xu Bing, among others; and as an artist practicing in China now, Zheng dares to adopt a fresh eye and applies immeasurable ambition to recording everything that has previously been dormant.

A modern ethnographer in his own country, Zheng seeks to individualise the Chinese people from the intrinsic assemblages of the populous orchestrated around their deities.