

He Chongyue: Layers of Time and Space

Alice Schmatzberger: How did you arrive at working with photography, especially with large and ultra-large-format cameras?

He Chongyue: It was in 1983, when I first had contact with photography on a very accidental occasion. I was born in a time when not many families could afford to have a camera or to take pictures.¹ But in 1983, I went to see Gao Weidong, who later was my first teacher in photography, as I was curious to discover how photos were developed. At that time, most of the photos being made were black-and-white. I was so surprised to see the differences of colour and I enjoyed their rich nuances. Later I started to learn from this teacher in my spare time, as at that time not many people in the art world were able to quit their jobs. In the 1980s and 1990s, I needed to work to make a living, and at the same time I wanted to develop my photographic interests further. It was not until 2005 that I started to work as a professional artist.

Alice Schmatzberger: What were your earliest works?

He Chongyue: The first works were not about art. My earliest works are some photos about rubbish trashed at the 798 Art District in Beijing, the Chongqing Tank District, and similar art districts in Shanghai. They were titled “*遗弃的遗弃*” (*yiqi de yiqi*), the leftovers of the leftovers. I shot some trashed sculptural works by renowned artists such as Sui Jianguo and Qin Ga. Similar good works would be worth a million Yuan if they were put on exhibition, but when they were trashed, they were worth nothing. I visited many art districts and shot a lot of such discarded pieces of artwork. This whole series was done in 2003 and 2004. Now I choose photography because it can directly express my own ideas.

Alice Schmatzberger: In the late 1990s you were a member of a group interested in promoting large-format work in photography. How did this experience stimulate or influence your approach towards photography?

He Chongyue: In 1998, I joined a group called China Large Format Photographers' Association. There were about eight or so people in the group, and it helped to shape my vision about how to move forward with my own art. But the 798 Art District was also important. It was the beginning of the new market for contemporary Chinese art, and it became a hot spot for exhibiting art. I was able to get to know many contemporary

artists there. So, in 2005, I resigned from my former job and became an artist. Just last night I saw huge buses carrying many visitors to 798, with tour guides. It has become more and more a tourist site.

Alice Schmatzberger: Contemporary photographic art is now mainly a matter of digital photography and post-production, whereas you are working with a rather special technique—large-format photography.

He Chongyue: The large-format camera provides very clear images and layers of richness and saturation. And this camera can produce really big images, which is also an important feature for contemporary photo works. More importantly, it is complicated to operate this camera and also expensive to shoot. Therefore, it demands that I think very carefully about what I am going to shoot. I must have a serious artistic investment in shooting a specific work. Over a long period of time, I have become used to carefully considering what subjects to shoot.

Alice Schmatzberger: And you prefer to work in series?

He Chongyue: I think people born in the 1960s have a sense of responsibility and conscience about recording what has been happening in our times. Only photography can faithfully keep those records for future generations. I cannot speak clearly or fully with a single image about, for example, the problems of the One-Child-Policy, the aging population, etc. In that case, viewers would not be able to understand what I mean and what problems I am talking about. So I must work in a series in order to adequately address these issues.

Alice Schmatzberger: You are shooting all your images in the countryside. What kind of preparation is necessary in order to do that?

He Chongyue: The only thing I have to do is meet with the respective local officials and convince them to agree to the project, I need to get their permission. Only after that, after the official agreements have been achieved, are the local villagers willing to participate in the photo shoots. I tried several times to work without the permission of local village heads—I wanted to do everything by myself—and see if these villagers would like to join me in the shoots, but actually I never succeeded. So finally I had to return to talking to the local officials first.

Alice Schmatzberger: I understand that concerning your topics you conduct a lot of research. You talk to experts; for example, with sociologists about developments in demography, or with philosophers about the value of human existence, and you use a diverse range of social statistics and information sources.

He Chongyue: Of course, it is as you said. In China there are a lot of social discussions about the old and inhuman policies. I myself have experienced these times, the Cultural Revolution, famines, etc. I have experienced all these social miseries. Therefore, I have strong feelings and I can reflect in-depth upon those sad memories.



Alice Schmatzberger: And each one of your images has its own specific historical background, politically or socially.

He Chongyue, *Image—The Red Era Background 03*, 2005, black-and-white photograph, 150 x 375 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

He Chongyue: I think my artworks are very much related to social realism, which I am not sure is the right translation. Some foreign journalists describe my work as being photo documentary. I don't think I agree with this term, "photo documentary." I focus my lens on social reality, and I observe the significance of these social stories more than the significance of documentary representation.

Alice Schmatzberger: Let's talk about your series *Image*, a trilogy consisting of *Image—The Red Era Background*, *Image—1957*, and *Image—1978*. Each of these three parts consists of eight works.

He Chongyue: This body of work deals with the period ranging from the beginnings of the Chinese Communist Party to the remnants of later policies and slogans, as well as records on the walls of houses documenting China's the social development over the last six decades. There are many historical stories behind these walls. And yes, each work has its own specific background story.

Alice Schmatzberger: The pictures in *Image—The Red Era Background* show posters and inscriptions on the wall, as well as carvings on stone tablets. Are these political messages in the sense of public communication of state policy, and often dating back to earlier times, for example, imperial China?

He Chongyue: Some of those stone tablets date to the 1930s. When the Communist soldiers arrived at a site they inscribed state slogans, encouragements, admonishments, etc. onto these stone tablets. Others are from the 1940s, a time when Mao Zedong launched the revolution and before the CCP controlled the government and the country. Still others are from the times after the new China had been established, in 1949. The posters and carving directly on the wall in *Image—The Red Era Background 03*, for example, are originally from the Qing dynasty.² This work was shot at a place called Hong Si Men, located in Nanjiang

county,³ which has old architecture from the Qing dynasty. But the Communists started to put their own inscriptions over the older ones from the imperial era. At the beginning of 1933⁴ the Fourth Division of the Red Army came in and cut out the old characters, and they inscribed seventeen slogans onto the old walls and stone tablets. It was a convenient way for the soldiers to use these walls and stone tablets for their own propaganda. Originally these stone tablets were all part of buildings, especially in south China where houses were built using bricks. There was a very old-fashioned city gate from 1933 covered with the most modern slogans, although even if one slogan covered up the earlier slogans, the new slogan itself would be replaced by another one in the near future. Later, by the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of Deng Xiaoping's Open Door Policy, in order to increase interesting tourist spots and create sightseeing sites, some of these inscriptions were cut out, and together with the stone tablets, detached from their original context on a building, and set up separately elsewhere.

Alice Schmatzberger: And does every single image within the entire trilogy have such a specific historical background story?

He Chongyue, *Image—The Red Era Background 02*, 2005, black-and-white photograph, 150 x 375 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



He Chongyue: Yes. The sub-series *Image—1957* and *Image—1978* both come from a similar significant social background, referring to the specific respective year in the title. I am always trying to concentrate on conveying the social background. For example, for *Red Brick Canteen*, from the series *Image—1957*, I shot the picture at a farmer's house by the road of Yanting county.⁵ Although the house looked old, I could still see its former shape, condition, and scale. At this point in time, Chairman Mao launched the propaganda of "It is great to open people's communes." From then on communes were established throughout rural China. Inside people's

He Chongyue, *Image—1957 01 (Red Brick Canteen)*, 2006, black-and-white photograph, 150 x 375 cm. Courtesy of the artist.





He Chongyue, *Image—1957 05*, 2006, black-and-white photograph, 150 x 375 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

communes, canteens were opened for the general public, thus implementing the slogan “The first important thing is the big party, and the second is the public. Politics are united with Communes.” There were more such slogans such as “Communism is a heaven, and People’s communes are bridges.” Inside these commune canteens, no one needed to pay for eating. It was propagated that “eating is free so that people could make a great effort to work.” By 1958 private kitchens and cooking was completely banned.

Later, this system of communes was further developed and expanded into other areas such as dressing, seeing doctors, schooling, and going to theatres. Some communes even offered “all inclusive” services, with eight or ten inclusions, for example, free eating, marrying, funeral ceremonies, etc. All affairs of life and welfare were taken care of by the communes. In order to expand “the communist factors,” each village started communist public canteens by dismantling private home kitchens, confiscating all woks, pans, and bowls. From then on, all food and welfare for communist members were distributed through the canteens. This was in fashion without rationing. But this development also marked the beginning of a big famine. According to official reports, the three-year famine that followed killed almost thirty to forty million people. I took this photograph fifty-four years later, and it is really difficult to still find such a well-preserved location with traces of this past as the one in this photograph.

The trilogy *Image—1978* is more focused on the transformation after the economic reform of 1978. China has changed a lot over the last decades. You can see the political slogans and followers of such campaigns all across China. The photographs record the background of these respective years, and, again, each photo talks about a different story. For example, different leaderships disseminate their own beliefs and interpretations in specific slogans that end up as writings on the walls. We still have such slogans. During the periods of governance of Jiang Zemin,⁶ and Hu Jintao respectively, these slogans were, for example, about the “Three Representations”⁷ or the “Eight Honors and Eight Disgraces.”⁸

Alice Schmatzberger: On the other hand, both your other series *A Billion To One: Dictated Parenthood and The Feudal Mind* and *The End—An Ageing Population—The Family Planning* address present-day problems.⁹ *A Billion To One* deals with the policy of birth control; that is, the One-Child Policy and the law regulating family planning and population. *The End*, on the

other hand, approaches the consequences of this demographic change, the consequences of China's growth and increasing urbanization, the resulting rural exodus, etc.

He Chongyue: Both series are related to each other. The issues in *The End* arise directly from *A Billion To One*. I will continue exploring these issues as there are still a lot of levels and layers to explore connected to these ideas. It already has been my focus for a long time. The One-Child Policy brought China huge disasters over the last thirty years, and the effect has not been revealed fully yet. These problems have just emerged, such as the different ratio between men and women—the so-called gender imbalance—and the demographic changes of an over-aging population. It will take a longer time to reveal the deep side effects affecting the generation of the One-Child policy, as it is still quite young. I started *A Billion to One* one year after the beginning of *The End*¹⁰ because I felt that I must shoot this older generation before it perishes. In the autumn of 2012, I went to Qinghai province and to the north of Shanxi province to do more of these photo shoots. The issue of aging will be further explored in my images.

Alice Schmatzberger: Were the billboards you depict in *A Billion To One* used to propagate the One-Child Policy in public spaces? Did you know about them already, or did you come across them by coincidence? And do the inscriptions on them still reflect the actual state policy on family planning?



He Chongyue, *A Billion to One: Dictated Parenthood and the Feudal Mind No. 7*, 2006, colour photograph, 152 x 190 cm. Courtesy of the artist

He Chongyue: Many years ago I aimlessly drove my car down to southern China. I went through Yunnan and Sichuan provinces, and every now and then I saw these billboards. Most of them were set up along expressways, along the major roads, so that many people would see them. I am still looking for more of them. The One-Child Policy started around the end of the 1970s, so these billboards were mainly installed between the 1980s and the 1990s; those twenty years were the strictest years for this policy. While it remains state policy, the enforcement of it has begun to relax; for example, when you live in the countryside and your first child is a boy, then you cannot have a second child. But if you have a daughter as a first child, then you can have a second child.

Alice Schmatzberger: So, one could say that while the complete *Image* trilogy focuses on China's past, *A Billion To One* is about the present status-quo, and *The End* is about the very near future—it's like an extension of the former topics, about the present and forthcoming consequences resulting from former social policies.

He Chongyue: Yes, they are signalling some bad things, which might happen—like a prediction. So the first is already gone, the second on-going, and the latter is like the end result, with only old people with some children left in the countryside. This is why I do not agree with my work being judged as documentary photography. Probably it is something in-between—most of my works have a story to tell, but it's more a discussion about sociological points of view.

Alice Schmatzberger: Could it be understood as a kind of social analysis of today's society?

He Chongyue: Exactly.

Alice Schmatzberger: Are you making statements about values of modern society, about old or new or necessary values?

He Chongyue: For contemporary society we really need a great value system to support us, but the whole value system is decaying, breaking down.

Alice Schmatzberger: Finally, I am really interested in one fascinating small detail: If one takes a closer look at the pictures from the *Image* trilogy as well as at those from *A Billion to One*, one notices small circular mirrors hanging on the walls and on the billboards. What are the mirrors about?

He Chongyue: In ancient times we had a great saying that used the mirror as a metaphor. Different dynasties followed this wisdom for a long time. It goes like this: If you use history as a mirror, you will recognize and understand the changes of the times, why dynasties are replaced by other dynasties. If you use bronze, or any other reflecting material as a mirror, you can only place yourself in a good position; for example, you change your clothes and can see how you look. But if you use a human being or your personal feelings as a mirror—which is the meaning of this

ancient metaphor—you are not only reflecting upon history, you are also intermingling or encoding yourself into history. Thus, I am using myself, my own person, as the mirror.

Alice Schmatzberger: You therefore inscribe yourself into history, thus emphasizing the link between the past and the present—the former being the root of the latter—through your own presence in these images and thus representing even another layer of time.

He Chongyue: Exactly. I am observing what has been happening in society. I am one of them. I am observing, like an analyst.

Alice Schmatzberger: You put yourself in the position of an observer, but not from the outside—instead, from the inside?

He Chongyue: I am coming back to one of your previous questions. If I were a documentary photographer, if my work was for documentary purposes only, I would not take so much time to go to different rural areas or to do such in-depth research. I would not carry out all of this preparation. My purpose is to explore these social issues from a more in-depth perspective over a longer period of time. Again, concerning the mirror metaphor: If you use the person as a mirror you can identify the true from the false; you can distinguish between them. For the last ninety years there have been a lot of social disturbances and problems, but they are like leftovers from the past. So the question is not if I am or am not a documentary photographer. I am using my photography so that I have a voice to speak with and have things to tell about history.

Alice Schmatzberger: You did not make use of the mirror, this symbol for a connection between the past and the present, within the series *The End*. What is the reason behind this decision?



He Chongyue, *The End—An Ageing Population—The Family Planning Series*, 2010, colour photograph, 120 x 300 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

He Chongyue: In this series I depict the elder, local villagers. These are the people who supported us, the rest of society, through their planting and growing of food; they represent our society. They grew vegetables and corn. They nourished us and provided food services in the canteens. They are parents or grandparents. They always had to deal with a lot of different developments in history. They are not the right people to blame for the problems in society today. If I would place a mirror among them, this would be a very disrespectful gesture. In the other series the mirror stands for reflection, for a critical point of view—that would not be the correct thing to do here.

Alice Schmatzberger: How do you intend to progress with your work from now on?

He Chongyue: I am working on a portrait series. I plan to go back to these villages where I shot the series *The End*, and I will make single portrait images of the peasants, very formal ones, almost royal-looking, and using traditional China blue as a background. I do not have a fixed number of people to photograph. Roughly there might be about fifty to eighty. Most of the people will be seniors. For me, it is about giving them back some kind of dignity; they did nothing wrong.

Notes

¹ He Chongyue was born in Beijing in 1960.

² 1644–1912.

³ Sichuan province.

⁴ “In the winter of 1932, the Fourth Army Division had to flee during Chiang Kai-Shek’s fourth siege. They occupied Bazhong and Nanjiang River in early 1933 to lay the foundation for the Chuan-Shaan Province of the China Soviet Republic, thoroughly destroying the existing old social order in the border regions of Sichuan and Shaanxi. . . . In December 1932 and February 1933, the government distributed Proclamation on the Land Issue and Proclamation on Land Reform by the Chuan-Shaan Provincial Soviet Government. . . . In the Chuan-Shaan Soviet, the Fourth Army Division left behind stone-carved slogans that have been called wonders of cultural propaganda. Examples include the first carving after the Red Army crossed into Sichuan, ‘Strive for a Soviet China’; there are the ‘Make all of Sichuan Red’ and ‘Evenly Distribute Land,’ and others such as ‘What is Gained from Striking Reactionaries Belongs to those who Strike the Reactionaries’ and ‘Better Land for those who Join the Red Army.’ All of these are accurate reflections of that period in history. . . . The markers left behind with the Red Army’s immediate departure and the disastrous results of the instant return to the old rural social order are testament that though revolution can thoroughly change the past, it cannot wholly determine the future direction of society.” Artist’s Web site, www.hechongyue.com/works1a1.html/.

⁵ Sichuan province.

⁶ 1989–2002 General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, 1993–2003 President of the People’s Republic of China.

⁷ “Three Representations” was the sociopolitical guiding ideology of the Communist Party under Jiang Zemin beginning in 2002. According to this theory, the Communist Party of China should be representative of advanced social productive forces, advanced culture, and the interests of the overwhelming majority. See also: <http://english.cpc.people.com.cn/66739/4521344.html/> or http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_representations/.

⁸ “Eight Honours and Eight Disgraces,” also known as “Eight Honours and Shames,” represents a “social core value system” developed by former General Secretary Hu Jintao for the citizens of the People’s Republic of China, including, for example, slogans such as “Love the country, do it no harm,” “Follow science; discard superstition,” and “Live plainly, work hard; do not wallow in luxuries and pleasures.” See also: http://news3.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-10/18/content_5220576.htm/ or http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eight_Honors_and_Eight_Shames/.

⁹ *A Billion to One: Dictated Parenthood and the Feudal Mind* is a series that has been on-going since 2006. *The End—An Ageing Population—The Family Planning Series* is a series that has been on-going since 2007.

¹⁰ *The End* depicts peasants and rural communities from villages in Hebei, Sichuan, Yunnan, Shanxi, and Guizhou. It is intended not only to show the consequences of social policies, urbanization, and workers’ migration, but also to show the dignity and pride of the rural population.