



**RIGHT**  
 Photograph by  
 Li Zhensheng.  
 Courtesy of  
 Contact Press  
 Images.

**FACING PAGE**  
 Photograph  
 by Jan Smith.  
 Opening function  
 of DIPE 2013.  
 Courtesy of  
 Erdmann  
 Contemporary.

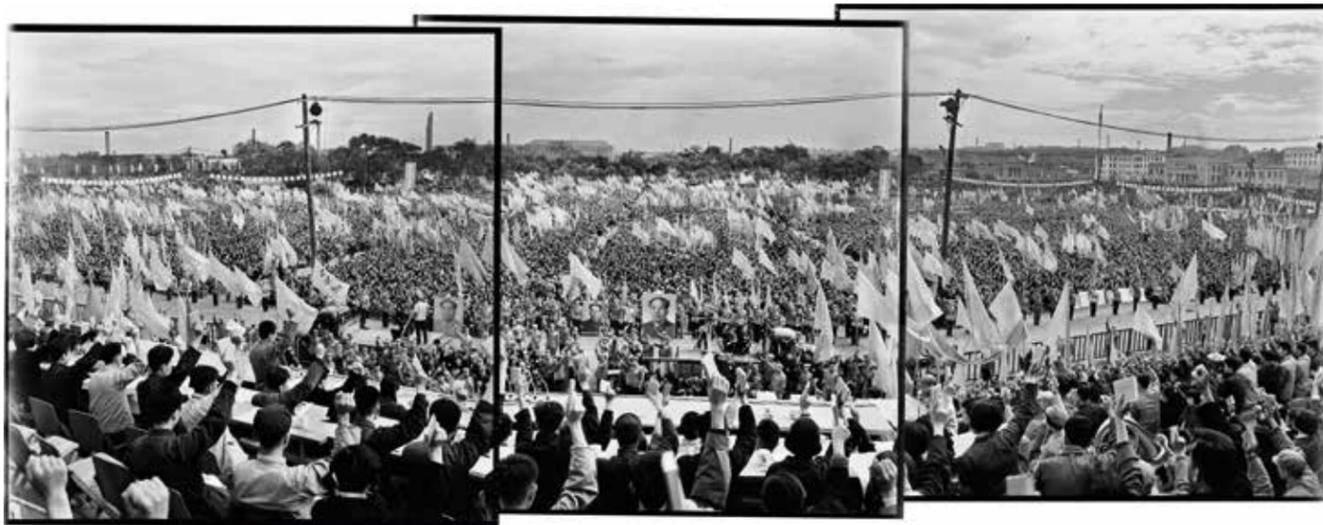
**HEIDI ERDMANN**

# ASLEEP IN FRONT OF THE CAMERA

It is difficult to get an impression of a Chinese aesthetic because cultural output is so tightly controlled by the Chinese State. Cultural output is tightly controlled by the Chinese people themselves and one gets the impression that swimming upstream or rocking the boat are not options: 'maintaining the status quo' is the mantra. Suffice to say that China itself is the most popular subject: its landscape, its photogenic people and

particularly its formidable progress: it is a study in beauty presented in the absence of commentary. This year I have had the opportunity to visit two of the country's most prestigious photographic festivals as an invited curator: the Dali International Photography Exhibition (DIPE) and Pingyao International Photography Festival (PIP). DIPE celebrated its fifth edition this year and is the smaller of the two festivals offering only 260 exhibitions. It is also the more commercial festival.





Photograph by Li Zhensheng. Courtesy of Contact Press Images.

PIP is a thirteen-year-old festival. The Chinese media dubs it the 'Oscars of Photography Festivals'. Not necessarily the better festival, it is certainly the largest in China... if not the world. More than 500 exhibitions are presented annually with an attendance of hundreds of thousands of people. Its mainstay is an educational component. Each year, a number of students along with their

professors are invited to Pingyao. Parsons, The New School for Design, Australian National University, Nanyang University of Technology and Columbia College, Chicago were amongst the invited guests this year.

Ironically, the primary commonality between these two festivals is not photography but antiquity. Both festivals are hosted in cities with medieval walled-in old towns. Pingyao, in the Shanxi province, has an old town that is considered one of the best-preserved in the world and has been awarded status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. As a visitor, it is hard to escape the city walls and venture into the newer areas but a walk along the wall offers good views of life on either side. Inside the walls, every scrap of earth is utilised. The flat rooftops in the picturesque old town are covered with sun-drying chillies and corn. The narrow streets are throbbing with activity, jam-packed with people, bicycles and mopeds – and golf carts! No cars are allowed. The view on the outside is starker: closely stacked utilitarian square boxes reaching into the sky represents modernity and progress in the new city.

The calibre of the exhibitions presented at both festivals is good. Participating photographers work closely with curators and installations are carefully considered. The work is technically of a high standard. There are of course weaker offerings too. Pingyao was China's financial centre during the Qing Dynasty and many of the oldest banks in the world can be found in the old town. Some of these ancient buildings have been converted into banking museums and it is often inside these magnificent spaces that weaker pop-up exhibitions are presented.

As a participant, I had two objectives: to establish the response to my own exhibitions and to view as many exhibitions as possible. There are two ways to establish a response to one's own offering. At DIPE, it is definitely through the media, particularly if an exhibition is well received, and at PIP it is the Floor Talk. These talks are well attended by an audience eager to engage and, according to the PIP festival organiser, this is the critical

**“In China countless facts and secrets are still asleep in front of the camera...”**

Catalogues notes - The Real China exhibition



Photograph by Stephen Dupont. Courtesy of Contact Press Images.

tell-tale event. The success of an exhibition depends on the level of audience engagement at a Floor Talk. Robert Pledge's exhibition *About Portraits and Panoramics – Papua New Guinea – The Infinitely Small and the Infinitely Big*, featuring photographs by Stephen Dupont, and *About Panoramics and Self Portraits – Heilongjiang – The infinitely Big and the Infinitely Small*, featuring photographs by Li Zhensheng, was a personal highlight. It received, and no doubt deserved, the award as 'best-curated exhibition' at DIPE this year. Despite the unwieldy title, Pledge offered his viewers a seamless exhibition of opposites and similarities by two distinctly different photographers.

Li Zhensheng worked at the Heilongjiang State newspaper during the time of the Cultural Revolution. At this time, journalists were obliged to present only positive images. Li Zhensheng, wearing a red armband as a token of support for Chairman Mao, gained access to the inner workings of the Cultural Revolution. But he also photographed the atrocities committed by the Red Guard. Unable to publish these images, he hid them under the floorboards of his apartment. With the help of Robert Pledge, founder of Contact Press Images, these photographs were recently published in a groundbreaking book under the title of *Red Colour News Soldier*, the English translation of the writing on the red armband he wore during the Cultural Revolution.

Stephen Dupont is an Australian photographer and artist who has worked in conflict areas for many years, focusing on marginalised communities. His evocative portraits depicting the erosion of Papua New Guinea culture and the emergence of a gangster class is a perfect foil for Li Zhensheng's sweeping images of patriotism.

By grouping the work of these photographers together, black and white against colour, self-portraits against portraits, panoramic against panoramic, the title of the exhibition becomes apparent, as does the unwavering eye of the curator. Pledge attempts to point to the fragility of the individual, alone in front of the lens, suddenly insecure, and then counterpoints to the power of the

group, albeit at the cost of individuality... even humanity.

Li Zhensheng was a guest at the festival but there was no sign of *Red Colour News Soldier*, which has not been published in China.

At PIP, I had the opportunity to review two portfolios. A North Korean-born photographer presented a series of photographs taken on the North Korea/China border. The photographer now lives in China and opposite, across the river separated by an insignificant barbed wire fence, lives his grandparents. The second portfolio presented by a non-Muslim female photographer focused on the daily rituals and lifestyle of a marginalised Muslim community in northern China. Interesting narratives, rarely seen images... but yet these portfolios offered neither interpretation nor comment. As a reviewer, one is eager to engage in a dialogue to get a clearer understanding of motive and inspiration. Admittedly, much is lost in translation, but one also gets the frustrating impression that no amount of discussion will lead to a more critical engagement of content.

There were some light points. The curators of a project called *The Real China* presented at DIPE signalled the need for change. Their curatorial notes include the following remarks: "Marc Riboud had been in a lonely struggle to record the real China, and does the 'real China' only exist in photographs by foreign photographers? And finally in China, countless facts and secrets are still asleep in front of the camera." These are brave words to put on paper in today's China. Yet the photographs on display lacked critical engagement and commentary. It left me with more questions than answers.

One learns a great deal about a country by looking at exhibitions. I have the impression that in China, at least for the next couple of years, photography will continue in its current form, meaning self-censorship above self-representation.

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