INTERVIEW WITH CHOW AND LIN

Siddharta Perez

NUS alumni and practicing artists Stefen Chow and Huiyi Lin present a series of photographic installations at the NUS Museum titled *Homeless*. Chow and Lin’s ongoing research-based project visually articulates the connection between geopolitics and global events. The new iteration in NUS puts together visual indicators of private and transnational economies, current mobility of communities and the shared aspect of power in society.

Chow and Lin is a collaborative husband and wife duo that takes its beginnings with *The Poverty Line*, a photographic series in 2010, which has since expanded from China in 2010 to 28 countries. The exhibition *Homeless* is composed of photographic pairings that prompt to unpack the complexity of scaling first-generation wealth vis-à-vis the refugee crises. The technical tool of satellite imaging is employed by Chow and Lin’s inquiries into fair use, and their understanding of this contemporary moment of open-access knowledge. As political boundaries shift concurrently to daily life, *Homeless* also suggests the vagaries of social security, and the platforms that monitor and dictate them.

This conversation piece with Stefen Chow and Huiyi Lin traces the ethos of their collaboration. The text also discloses the ways that critical and artistic thinking broaden knowledge of our positionality in the breadth of global issues.

Will you tell me about the beginnings of collaboration, and what is the genesis of your shared concerns about the world?

**Huiyi Lin (HL):** So we met in Eusoff hall in NUS in 1999 – that was where we stayed for four years. We did various sorts of hall activities, which gave us exposure to a bit of the world, which started shaping what we wanted to engage in. That was the beginning of working together in certain areas.

**What were your individual experiences that shaped your similar worldviews or ideas about the world at that time prior to being “Chow and Lin”?**

**Stefen Chow (SC):** I think it was my adventures in the mountains that started exposing me to the world outside Singapore. That was when I started seeing the world, and started trying to make sense of it. And I think one of the issues that I was
always grappling with was how the Sherpas in Nepal that I met during my expedition took far more risks and were paid barely acceptable international salaries. And yet the recognition that’s accorded to them for what they have done is minuscule compared to the amount of attention and fame I have actually gotten simply by climbing Everest once. That sentiment has always stuck.

HL: My five years as a public servant after graduation exposed me to an understanding of how macroeconomics works and how policy makers face decision-making in balancing issues on a tightrope, as well as understanding stakeholders’ needs. I also felt that a lot of these were at the very big picture, and there are a lot of issues that people were really facing at the ground level. The real problem can turn out to not necessarily be a material issue. Sometimes it’s an emotional or moral issue that the society is facing. We know that as society changes, government policies also have to change. How public policy moves together with society has always been something I’ve been interested in understanding.

When we moved to China, I think it was a totally different economic and political environment.

SC: Living in Beijing has been very useful in highlighting some of these things that we started to think about back then because it is not a comfortable place. Beijing is a place with issues, with debates, and I would say that the problems that are raised within China’s context are very different from the problems that are being raised in Singapore for example.

HL: I’ve worked a lot in India as well, that’s where my company had a big team. During my business trips to India, I was able to observe things on the ground, and that led me to find how different economic systems run in China, India and Singapore. But what is interesting is that although they are different worlds, they have very similar needs at different strata of society. For me, I’ve been trying to explore how commonalities within/of human needs are reflected across socioeconomic and political systems. We can say that a lot of issues are global issues but in the end they also really depend on the local communities, families and individuals on the ground level that are impacted by these bigger externalities.

I find the intersections of your individual concerns to meet at the inquiry towards the capacity of the big picture, macroeconomics as you say, to encompass and hold the problems that are experienced on the ground level. Perhaps power isn’t equal, and needs are not all met on every level... The foundation of being able to talk about these questions to each other preceded the duo name “Chow and Lin”.

SC: Our collaboration started way before we co-authored photography-based series. We’ve been collaborating for thirteen years now, since we started working. From 2005 onwards, I think our shared experiences have become more striking.
I understand that your conversations present themselves foremost as a visual form. Given that Stefen particularly makes a living as a photographer as well, what is particular to image-making that is particular to what you think of as tipping point issues in global mass media?

**SC:** My worldview is shaped by photographs. Photography as a language has the power to move and influence people. Powerful pictures translate universal values while good words actually need to be translated into the respective languages based on where you are. Some meanings get lost in that translation process. So in some ways, photographs have become a more common language for other people. However I noticed this from ten years ago, when the explosion of media through different forms also meant that a lot of genres of photography are being side-lined as really just a footnote. The beginnings of my career as a photojournalist saw the satisfaction of chasing news. But I also saw the problem, the downside, of how quickly these pictures fade into internet memory never to surface again.

When trying to see issues head on, and examining a bigger picture by trying to connect the dots we want a visual form of work that explains the complexities. I think we’ve had more difficulties trying to find the correct visual references to illustrate what we’re trying to do.

**Yeah, because as concerned practitioners grounded in work that involves encountering different social strata and different forms of privileged, how can you not utilise the visuals to illustrate points you are making?**

**SC:** For example, with the latest project, we use ready found images as our basis. It’s also a departure from what we have done in the past simply because I think that informs the message better. Photography is a language. But often, some languages that deal with topics like poverty have a specific purpose to elicit an emotional outcome. We think about a language that presents itself as more research-based, non-emotional and self-reflective, because we don’t want it so abstract that you don’t know what we’re talking about. Also, we don’t want to emotionally direct you in a certain direction. We want people who look at work to be able to think through with us. You walk away with a certain critical thinking, whatever position you hold within the social strata.

**How do you find Chow and Lin’s photographic language to be like?**

**SC:** A Chow and Lin project is never just about final visual form. It always starts with what are we concerned about. Are we able to do some research on this? Does the research show up to be different from what our assumed conclusion was? Part of the reason why Chow and Lin went out to do so many projects is because we also saw it as education for ourselves. We establish projects by using ourselves as a benchmark to find where some of our ideas are not well-informed, and that the topic is a much more serious problem than we initially thought it was.

**Is that how specialists come into the picture of a Chow and Lin project? I was wondering about that. When did you start talking to these field experts, and thinking of your collaboration with them through interview? Is this just for Homeless or have you done similar exercises before?**

**SC:** Since the *Equivalence* project, we started involving other experts and academics in lending their point of view as part of the work. This is because we realise that there are areas of knowledge that are beyond our spheres of access. Meaning, this is not just something you can read about. It’s significant that we work with different experts because they have been doing this form of research or practice all their lives.

Let’s look at *The Poverty Line*, for instance. The fact is it started as a self-initiated project between the two of us and based on both of our worldviews. But the project catapulted us into different worlds where we found ourselves presenting the same project at different conferences, meeting different speakers, meeting other experts. These worlds are where everyone has a different point of view which is very valuable to the project. So our own worldviews expanded because we were able to talk to people that are not just within our realm such as other economics-trained professionals or other photographers. We were in fact speaking to philosophers, historians and scholars. Formalising it into actual interviews makes sense because when we presented at some lectures where other experts came in, we enjoy those conversations a lot more than, “how do you take a picture?” These interactions presented us with more questions that are tangential to the opinions we were initially trying to speak about.

We see our work as being a catalyst for conversation. Ultimately, I think the barometer of success for a project is how much conversation and how much critical thinking we are able to generate for people who view our work or for the public at large.

**Let’s move on to your current series *Homeless*. In a way, it’s an evolution of *The Poverty Line*, because it touches upon states of inequality.**

**HL:** We had a singular topic that we focused on in *The Poverty Line*. With *Equivalence*, we started using the concept in a free flow manner to connect different big issues. These consolidated into an individual piece of [art]work. With *Homeless* it’s again using this visual to connect two current issues which are inequality and forced migration or refugee crises. Some of these individuals we profile own homes and have a fortune equivalent to the fortune of small countries. It’s actually a success of capitalism because many of them did not get their fortunes through inheritance. Some of them did so through first generation wealth accumulation. It boggles the mind that they could, in a single day, earn what a huge community of people would earn in years. It’s a reflection of how connected the world is today because their working hours, or the contribution of labour they put into an eight-hour day, do not translate anymore. It translates to their wealth only because they are plugged
into such a globalised world. At the same time, if you look at how inequality has shifted, inequality is simply defined as the gap between the people who have and the people who don’t have. The forced migrants are a surprising revelation because you will think that in a world where resources are available more than ever today, you still have a great number of people risking their lives to cross through journeys that none of us can ever imagine.

There is a sense that what connects these projects together is access. It is technology and actual open source that prompts these connections.

HL: The way we put issues together is how our lives are – the programmes and platforms we use are not straight forward. Hence, it is not like you can solve one problem and not touch other issues. We tend to hit something else which impacts another part of society or hit the nerve of another big issue. It is how you find that these issues are interlinked because neither are the solutions built separately nor are the problems caused by singular reasons. We have to look at how we use technology as a medium: as a way of capturing visuals which are readily accessed by society and different publics but are seldom used to evaluate these seemingly differing problems.

I like the idea of technology and how we really use it. What kind of tools do we make out of technology? Because I’m also a believer that things could be found because they are not truly hidden. And that it demands us to face our privilege, and think about our actions within this realm of open data.

SC: We want topics to be current at this moment because what we are doing right now is to be concerned about tipping point issues. Tipping point issues are important to us because each of these issues can alter history when it tips over. So whether it’s looking at poverty or looking at inequality or even looking at how information is harnessed in the world, each of these can be a potential tipping point issue. And when you look back, these are factors that have altered history in some ways. We foresee our work being focused on contemporary issues.

After all, it is an exciting time in our lives with a lot of these new breakthroughs so we don’t know what would happen to humanity in decades to come.

We have today that window of data availability that might not be available perhaps years from now even as we speak.

In Homeless, the process begins with identifying routes, and satellite (big picture) images of localities. Juxtaposed, they form implicit relations to data points concerning wealth and mobility. How are these images sourced?

SC: The simple answer is that satellite imagery wasn’t our initial intention to showcase the work, but it became the tool of choice because it was the way to do it. Using satellite imagery is more of a technical tool set that has little substitute, rather than to be considered ‘found’ images. To us at least, satellite imagery signifies a shared open world with open sourced knowledge that also invades and redefines the boundaries of what privacy is and what of it is left. Sourcing these images is a question of fair use, even though these boundaries are being shifted even as we speak.

As we examined the richest and the less fortunate people in the world, we realised that the one thing that was common to them was homes, and the lack thereof.

Finding the localities of the richest people in the world can be a tricky affair. The fact is that the media at large is obsessed about them, and many of their purchases of ostentatiously elaborate homes are tabloid headlines and noteworthy among mainstream press.

The journeys taken by refugees or the least fortunate are researched as deeply as we can. Among academics, economists or statisticians, opinions can differ wildly, and we stand by our research as much as we can.

Chow & Lin (b.1980, Malaysia/Singapore)

Stefen Chow is a Malaysia-born, Singapore-raised photographer. His work won a World Press Award, nominated by Prix Pictet and Nikon named him one of Asia's top photographers. His work has appeared on Wall Street Journal, Foreign Policy, Smithsonian and GEO magazine. Stefen reached the summit of Mount Everest at the age of 25 and was involved in 10 Himalayan expeditions. He currently lives and works in Beijing.

Huiyi Lin is an economist by training and is a market researcher. She has a background in economic policy, and obtained an MBA from the Tsinghua University – MIT Sloan School International MBA Program. She has planned and implemented corporate development programs in Singapore and is currently based in Beijing, conducting multi-industry market research for a multi-national clientele. She is passionate about solutions that make social, environmental, and commercial sense.