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## Photographing Deformity: Liu Zheng and His Photo Series “My Countrymen”

Wu Hung

**E**mily Post on *Etiquette* summarizes a basic rule for civilized behavior:

Q: How do you behave around disabled individuals?

A: Ideally, you behave just as you would around a person who has no visible handicap. Never stare. . . .<sup>1</sup>

But *any* photograph of disabled people must ignore Post's advice: The very act of photographing someone with a disability implies not only intense “staring” but also the decision to record that person's physical impairment for posterity.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, an effort must be made to legitimate this decision: Either the photographer or an interpreter must provide acceptable reasons for the images' production and existence. These reasons can be (and have been) established on scientific

1. Emily L. Post, *Emily Post on Etiquette* (New York: Perennial Library, 1987), 54.

2. It is worth noting Post's phrase: “behave just as you would around a person who has no visible handicap.” It reminds us that in Western culture staring is rude, period. But if it is necessary to remind readers of this when they encounter a “visible handicap,” are we to assume that disabilities increase human sensitivity to staring or to the tendency to stare? How we answer raises a further question: Whom is Post's advice ultimately intended to protect? Etiquette manuals are for readers who wish to avoid acting and appearing uncouth. Confronted with a spectacle of disability, Post's reader is the vulnerable one. A flustered bourgeois public forgets its manners, its eyes a lazy prey to the faux pas of the stare. And so the reminder: Never stare. As well as the questions: Can a photography whose subject is fascination redeem the contretemps? And should it? *Ed.*

or artistic grounds and can be (and have been) formulated as emotional or ideological motives. Thus R. Ollerenshaw opens the anthology *Medical Photography in Practice* with his warning against the illegitimate use of clinical photos.<sup>3</sup> Diane Arbus's "freak" portraits have been interpreted in many ways, including as social documentary and as reflections of her "inner chaos."<sup>4</sup> But behind each of these opinions lies a similar compulsion: to justify the supposedly antisocial aspect of images of people with disabilities. Consistent with Post's advice, there is an assumption that because a person with a disability cannot be stared at inoffensively—because his or her body apparently cannot be wholesomely visually enjoyed—the person with a disability cannot be innocently photographed. That is, pictures of disabled people cannot in good conscience be made without a rationalization based on factors beyond what is apparent in the images themselves. It is this assumption that much of the critical literature of disability studies seeks to overturn.

"Artistic" photographs of people living with a deformity, illness, or disability—along with justifications for making and exhibiting these images—have appeared in China only since the 1980s. Before then, China had not produced its own Arbus or Stanley Burns.<sup>5</sup> Rather, the government's cultural policy discouraged any attempt to reveal "the dark side of society." Under Mao's direct patronage, a socialist realist art was developed over the 1950s and 1960s with a mandate to create idealistic images of workers, peasants, and soldiers. The Cultural Revolution further eliminated any individual traits in these images, transforming them into symbolic representations of a healthy, revolutionary people uplifted by the Communist faith. The monopoly that this official art held from the 1960s to 1970s established the historical conditions from which developed two subsequent artistic movements in the late 1970s and early 1980s: "scar art" (*shanghen meishu*), which depicted human tragedies during the Cultural Revolution, and "native soil art" (*xiangtu meishu*), which advocated realistic portrayals of ordinary people

3. R. Ollerenshaw, "Medical Illustration in the Past," in *Medical Photography in Practice, a Symposium*, ed. E. F. Linssen (London: Fountain, 1961), 1–17, especially 17.

4. For conflicting interpretations of Arbus's work, see Patricia Bosworth, *Diane Arbus: A Biography* (New York: Avon, 1984); Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1978); and especially David Hevey, "The Enfreakment of Photography," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 1997), 332–47.

5. Burns is a New York doctor who has published books from his large collection of historical medical photographs, which includes many images of physically disabled and diseased bodies. See Joel-Peter Witkin and Stanley B. Burns, *Masterpieces of Medical Photography: Selections from the Burns Archive* (Pasadena, Calif.: Twelvetees, 1987). My thanks to Christopher Phillips for providing me with information about Burns and the Burns Archive.

(albeit still often in a romanticized manner). Both movements contributed to the emergence of documentary photography in the middle and late 1980s as an important component of “experimental art” (*shiyan yishu*).<sup>6</sup> When a group of young artists of that period exhibited their photographs of “human ruins”—lunatics, cripples, prostitutes, and children in extreme poverty—they broke radically from the socialist realist canon.<sup>7</sup> Not only did their subject matter violate the taboo against representing the “dark side of society”; their journalistic style and snapshot aesthetics also sharply contrasted with the idealized and polished images ubiquitous in officially sponsored artwork.<sup>8</sup>

When this type of documentary photography crested in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Liu Zheng was still a college student at Beijing’s University of Science and Technology. Majoring in optics, he took an elementary photography class and became addicted to the camera. Unsatisfied with the school’s offerings on the subject (the course was the only one available), he sought knowledge of photography from any specialist he could find. Hearing that Ma Jinghua, a teacher at the Art Academy of the People’s Liberation Army, was good at taking portraits, Liu Zheng tracked him down and began to follow him everywhere. Ma found the obsessed young man unbearable and called him a lunatic when Liu Zheng insisted on tagging along after him in public. It was just after the June Fourth Movement (the 1989 student pro-democratic demonstrations in Tiananmen Square that ended in bloodshed), and Beijing was filled with patrolling soldiers. Hearing Ma shout, the soldiers interrogated Liu Zheng, who, doubly wounded, answered their questions by repeating Ma’s accusation: “I am a lunatic.”<sup>9</sup> This incident introduced a pattern in Liu Zheng’s life: His dedication to photography is always coupled with a feeling of betrayal by his fellow human beings.

After graduating from college in 1991, Liu Zheng worked for a year in Beijing’s Municipal Mining Bureau. One of his first assignments was to photograph coal miners in twenty small mines around the city. He worked three months on the project and often spent days underground. But when he finally selected two hundred photos and handed them to his superior, the superior asked him where

6. For a definition of *experimental art* in post-Cultural Revolution China, see Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, 1999), 12–16.

7. Representatives of these photographers include Lü Nan, Yuan Dongping, Zhang Haier, and Han Lei.

8. Beginning in 1989, Yuan Dongping traveled to many mental asylums in China and took a large number of photographs of mental patients. I discuss works by Yuan in *Transience*, 94–101.

9. Liu Zheng, interview with the author, 10 May 1998, Beijing.

the other ten rolls of films were—the two hundred photos accounted for only seven of the seventeen rolls he had been given for the assignment. Humiliated and enraged, Liu Zheng refused to explain and told his superior that in fact he had stolen the film and was quitting the job. Similar situations occurred after he went to work in 1992 in the editorial department of the *Worker's Daily* newspaper, first as a proofreader and later as a photojournalist. After recalling one such event during an interview, he lamented: “I can never have good relationships with people around me. I don't know if this is because I don't understand them or because they don't understand me. It just seems so absurd!”<sup>10</sup> Gradually he discovered that he felt safe and in control only around people with whom he did not have to interact on a daily basis—people who were considered marginal or were rejected by society. These people, invisible in everyday life, eventually became the subjects of his photographic series “My Countrymen.”



Distinguishing himself from the 1980s photographers of “human ruins,” Liu Zheng abandoned their informal, journalistic approach in favor of technical perfection and visual monumentality. His photos of the physically and mentally disabled, patients in asylums, and other marginal subjects are large portraits with balanced composition and rich tonal contrast. Also, unlike the earlier photojournalists, who sought emotional responses over rationalization, Liu Zheng made his photos according to a preconceived master plan—an enormous tripartite visual epic he intends to devote his entire life to completing. Each of the three series in the epic, titled “My Countrymen” (“*Guoren*”), “Three Realms” (“*Sanjie*”), and “Revolution” (“*Geming*”), is to consist of sixty to one hundred large photos.<sup>11</sup> Together they will compose his personal understanding of China—its culture, history, mythology, and ethics—and announce it to the world. Soon after he formulated this plan in 1997, Liu Zheng quit his job at the *Worker's Daily* and started working full time on the project. In this, the fourth year of his grand undertaking, “My Countrymen”—the first collection of the series—is near completion.<sup>12</sup>

10. Liu Zheng, interview with the author, 10 May 1998, Beijing.

11. The plan described here is based on my last interview with Liu Zheng, conducted in December 2000. His earlier conception of the plan, which I summarized in *Transience*, 167, was somewhat different.

12. Liu Zheng showed me a “complete set” of this series in the summer of 2000. But when I interviewed him again at the end of that year, I found that he had replaced some pictures with new ones. It is possible that he will keep making changes until the entire set is exhibited and published in a catalog. Over the past three years, Liu Zheng has made some photos for another series in the epic called “Three Realms.” I have discussed these works in *Transience*, 160–67. In one interview, Liu Zheng told

The one hundred photos in this collection portray a wide range of diverse subjects—not only living and dead human figures but also medical specimens and sculptured mannequins. The idiosyncratic selection of subjects results from a gradual accumulation of images reflecting the artist's photographic experience from 1997 to 2000: These are the people and images Liu Zheng encountered, became fascinated by, and photographed to his satisfaction.

Although he never articulated a coherent iconography for the series and has not deliberated on its sociological significance, the impressive number of images permits a statistical ordering. By mapping some recurrent themes it is possible to gain a context for understanding his portrayals of disabled bodies. What follows is my classification of the one hundred photographs based on the identities of their subjects; the number of photos in each category is given in parentheses:

1. Disability and illness (total 12): developmentally disabled and mentally ill (5), physically disabled and impaired (4), old and sick (3).
2. Sexual disorientation, transformation, and disguise (total 29): homosexual and transsexual (4), men dressed as women (9), actors and actresses (16).
3. Social punishment and prejudice (total 20): prisoners (6), beggars and wanderers (5), prostitutes and bar girls (7), coal miners (2).
4. Ethnic and religious minorities (total 12): ethnic minorities (4), religious figures (8).
5. Death and posthumous mutilation (total 18): corpses and funerals (8), medical specimens and dissected bodies (8), slaughterhouse (2).
6. Sculptural representations (total 9): grotesque mannequins (7), funerary statues (2).

Without a fixed order, these photos testify to Liu Zheng's unspoken perceptions of the transformations to which the human form is subject. Notably, many of the subjects fit the common notion of the *stigmatized*. Erving Goffman pointed out almost forty years ago that in modern society the ranks of the stigmatized are characterized by a high degree of eclecticism. As deviants from the normative order, the stigmatized include not only the mentally ill and the physically disabled but also ethnic and racial minorities, homosexuals, hard-core drug users, and criminals and ex-convicts. Some are stigmatized by circumstances of birth or the caprices of fate; others are deliberate violators of the social and moral order.<sup>13</sup>

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me that his parents were well to do and supported his artistic endeavors and that he did not have to "waste time" earning a living.

13. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963).

It is interesting to note that from very early on, disabled people were photographed among the ranks of the stigmatized. Thus in late-nineteenth-century Paris, the Salpêtrière Hospital produced journals full of pictures not only of medical patients but also of prostitutes, gypsies, Jews, Arabs, and other individuals on society's margins.<sup>14</sup> A century later, the 1972 photo album *Diane Arbus* features not only dwarfs and developmentally disabled girls but also an albino acrobat, a "Jewish giant," transvestites, drag queens, nudists, prostitutes, a topless dancer, masked men and women, and people identified simply as "freaks."<sup>15</sup>

Knowing nothing of Goffman's writing, Liu Zheng has photographed almost all of the stigmatized types that Goffman categorized. Liu Zheng's eyes are fixed on people who are recipients of unwanted identities and who have been made objects of prejudice. But his pictures are not vehicles of social criticism. Liu Zheng has been quoted saying: "I am not a humanist. I photograph these people to show the helpless absurdities of human existence."<sup>16</sup> In consequence, like their subjects in real life, his images frequently inspire revulsion and fear, not sympathy and pity. And a dispassionate spectator may well attribute his or her discomfort at viewing these photos to the subjects themselves, holding them responsible for their perceived flaws.



But living people are not the exclusive content of Liu Zheng's series. Two of its persistent focuses—those of death and grotesque figural representations—exceed the interpretive reach of the stigma framework and testify instead to the photographer's fascination with the transformations of a degenerate body. In particular, the inclusion of these two types of images erases the boundary between reality and unreality. Liu Zheng returned repeatedly to this topic during my interviews with him: The more he worked on the project, the less convinced he was of the separation between life and death and between the observed world and artistic representation. A living person can in many ways be partially distorted and dead, while a dead body can continue to live through the pain its mutilation inflicts on an observer. A grotesque mannequin may be artificial in reality, but its artificiality can recede in a photograph, where representation and reproduction seem to command the power to endow life. Following this line of argument, we

14. See Ulrich Baer's very interesting article, "Photography and Hysteria: Toward a Poetics of the Flash," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 7 (1994): 41–77.

15. Diane Arbus, *Diane Arbus* (New York: Millerton, 1972).

16. Bingman [pseud.], "The Chinese at the Turn of the New Millennium: A Review of Liu Zheng's Photographic Series 'The Chinese'" (manuscript, n.d.).

find the key to understanding “My Countrymen” not in Goffman’s categories but in an open-ended series of transformations consisting of marginal or transitional stages.

The notion of transformation, rather than categorization, better explains Liu Zheng’s photos because it allows us to see them as a representational whole. The series links the stigmatized to dying, death, and posthumous mutilation on the one hand and to fantastic or macabre figurations of the body on the other. Because these connections are continuously established on shifting levels, deformation is perceived as an ongoing process of physical deterioration: Even a stone statue is subject to ruin. In Liu Zheng’s own words, whether a photo portrays a living person or a corpse, a human being or a sculpture, it is installed in the series because the image is “simultaneously real and surreal, both here and not here.”<sup>17</sup> In this sense, these images pertain to various liminal stages—transitional phases in a “rite of passage.”<sup>18</sup> Some anthropologists have proposed that stigmatized people are liminal because “they are marginal to society—poised perhaps to enter, but still outside its boundaries.”<sup>19</sup> But when understood in this expanded manner, *liminality* can be used to characterize other states of being, including those of the mutilated corpse or the mannequin, states that lie outside normality and point to transitional positions or transient moments.

Among contemporary Chinese photographers, Liu Zheng has perhaps devoted the most time, energy, and money to portraying people with disabilities. But what really distinguishes these portraits from works of similar content is not their quantity and artistry but the relationship between the photographer and his subjects. Historically speaking, many portraits of disabled people are humanistic in intent, offering sympathy for their subjects and demanding justice on behalf of them. Other photographers are attracted by the transmogrified body, which evokes in them mixed feelings of fascination, contempt, and awe.<sup>20</sup> In either case, these artists identify themselves with what sociologists call the hegemonic group

17. Cited in Bingman. Translation slightly modified based on the original Chinese text.

18. In its original definition, formulated by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, *liminality* is inherent to rites of passage from separation to transition to reincorporation. See Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), and Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), and *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1969).

19. Robert F. Murphy et al., “Physical Disability and Social Liminality,” *Social Science and Medicine* 26 (1987): 237.

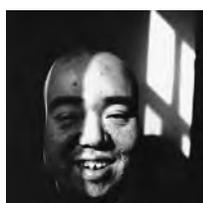
20. For example, Arbus found that photographing “freaks” caused “a terrific kind of excitement” in her: “There’s a quality of legend about freaks. Like a person in a fairy tale who stops you and demands that you answer a riddle.” *Diane Arbus*, 3.

of the able-bodied majority. Liu Zheng's self-positioning in conducting his project is more complex and ambiguous. On the one hand, he is fascinated by physical impairment and transforms his disabled subjects into aesthetic objects. On the other hand, he finds himself deeply connected to these people because, as mentioned earlier, he sees his inability to relate to everyday society as proof of his own marginal identity. Liu Zheng told me that many photographers are amazed by his ability to communicate with people whose bodies or minds are disabled: He seems to know by instinct how to persuade them to pose for him. But while this ability gives him confidence, its apparent confirmation of a personal tie to his subjects also troubles him.

Liu Zheng's portraits of disabled people betray his complex self-identity, as David Hevey argued for Diane Arbus. The pictures seem to carry a personal importance for Liu, each photo being the result of a persistent effort over a prolonged period of time. Extremely patient, he spent days and even weeks to win over the trust of his subjects, who were in most cases suspicious of outside attention. He took pictures only with a subject's full consent, and so we find that the person in each portrait—even a brain tumor patient on his death bed—always looks out and acknowledges the photographer's existence. These portraits are not spontaneous snapshots captured in a moment of inspiration or opportunity. Liu Zheng's subjects pose for him in self-conscious and often stiff gestures; in return he frequently employs a standard composition for a formal portrait, placing a sitter at the center of the picture in a frontal view. He is also obsessed with the quality of the prints; his goal, he has told me, is to make each print "shimmering with beautiful tonal variations." As a consequence, the photos in "My Countrymen" display their disturbing subjects in polished style with perfect technical control, generating a visual disharmony that further intensifies the inner drama of each portrait. It is not difficult to trace the source of this disharmony to the photographer's split desire: While documenting his grotesque subjects he also discovers himself in them.

The eleven photographs reproduced in this essay demonstrate the diverse subjects of the series “My Countrymen.” Instead of accompanying the pictures with a formal analysis or a social critique, I have tried to use Liu Zheng’s own words to describe the occasions on which they were taken. These words are derived from several interviews I conducted with him over three years, from 1998 through 2000. By weaving his own accounts into short narratives, I hope to reproduce his personal voice in a way that conveys his positionality in making these pictures.

—*Wu Hung*



**Picture 1: Two Retarded Men on the Street (Tongxian, 1996)**

*Tongxian is in the eastern suburbs of Beijing. I met these two men in a small park at the center of town. They were from different families, but both appeared in the park every morning as part of their daily routine. When they saw me they always shook my hand, raised their arms to salute me, and then went about their business, which was to direct the traffic in the park. Of course no one listened to them, but their seriousness never flagged. They were dressed in police uniforms. The older guy also wore a policeman's cap, a tie, and a pair of sunglasses. It took me several years to realize that most retarded people in Beijing love police uniforms. Policemen are probably the most powerful people in their minds, and wearing such clothes, they feel they are as powerful as policemen. One of them said to me one day: "I am a man of the government. You cannot touch me!"*



Liu Zheng

**Picture 2: Old Man Performing as a Girl (Beijing, 1995)**

*One day in 1995, I ran into a strange team of performers in a subway station in Beijing. There were forty to fifty of them, all dressed in colorful costumes and wearing heavy makeup. Most of them were quite old; only a few were middle-aged. They told me that they came from Qinhuangdao, in northern Hebei. Because the government had lowered the age of retirement to sixty or even fifty-five, they now found themselves jobless and with nothing to do in their lives. So they formed a touring yangge [a folk dance genre popular in northern China] troupe to amuse themselves and to earn some money. Some low-budget clubs and hotels hire them, because the customers love to see old guys dancing in young girls' outfits.*

*I followed them to the place where they were going to perform that night—an underground theater remodeled from an air-raid shelter built in the early seventies. I couldn't bring myself to watch them perform. Several actors asked me to take their portraits. The one in this picture was actually seventy-two years old. A younger one, also dressed in female clothes, held my hand and saw me off at the entrance.*

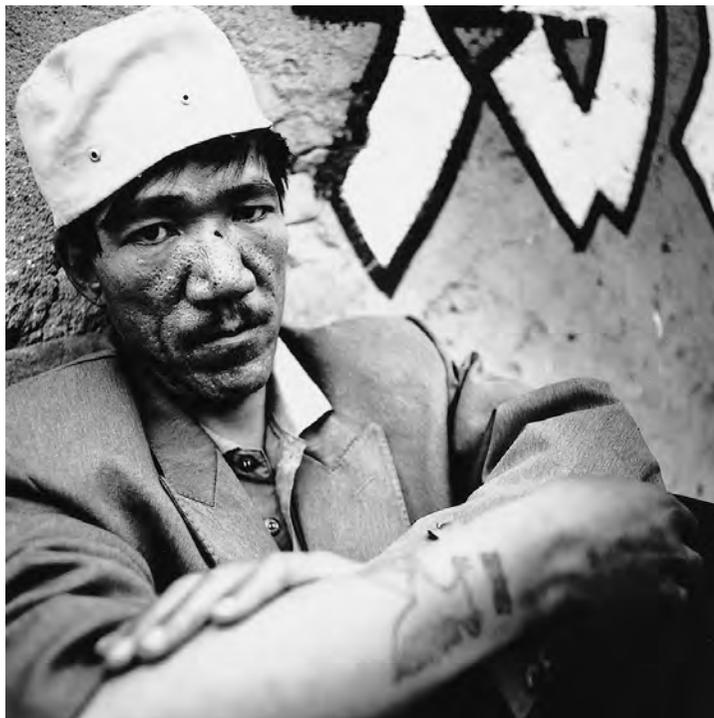


Liu Zheng

**Picture 3: Drug Addict in a Rehab Center (Tongxin, Niangxian, 1996)**

*Tongxin is the poorest place I've ever been to. It is also a Minority Autonomous County, with a population that is 95 percent Muslim. The novelist Zhang Chengzhi has written about this place, which was conquered during the Qing dynasty but never lost its desire for independence. So its people became even more fervent about their religion and since then have also found refuge in drugs. Most people became drug addicts because they are too poor. They have to live with drugs because making and selling drugs provide their main livelihood.*

*The rehab center outside Tongxin combines a hospital, an asylum, and a prison in one. It is a tightly guarded compound with forty to fifty patients in it. Some of them are sent there by their families; others, by the local government. They sing and exercise according to a strict schedule. But everyone knows it is useless, because statistics show that 99 percent of them resume their old habit as soon as they leave the center. I met this guy during my visit. He was suspected of being a chief drug dealer in the region, and if the police could prove it, they would execute him the next week. But there simply isn't enough evidence. In the center, he was so silent but formidable that he got on everyone's nerves. Even the guards did not dare offend him. When I asked him if I could photograph him, he looked straight in my eyes for a long time. He didn't move a bit when I took pictures. There's a tattoo on his arm. No one knows what it means, but to me, it echoes the pattern of the anti-drug slogan on the wall behind him.*



Liu Zheng

**Picture 4: Medical Specimens of Four Deformed Fetuses (Beijing, 1999)**

*I have a friend who works in one of Beijing's medical colleges. One day I went to visit him and saw rows of glass bottles containing medical specimens—dissected body parts, internal organs, and embryos of various kinds—placed on the ground outside the college's main building. The building was being renovated, and the college had decided to throw them away. The embryos included many deformed ones. I saw a fetus with a harelip and others with deformed limbs or genitals. Their symptoms were written on labels tied to their arms. I was taken aback by how large they were.*

*It was a very cold winter day. The formaldehyde in the bottles was frozen. The naked fetuses looked like they were sleeping in crystal. I used a glove to wipe off the dust covering the bottles and took a lot of pictures of the fetuses. I kept thinking about them during the next few days. I really wanted to keep them for myself. But when I went back to the college, all of them had been buried in a large pit. My friend blamed me for not telling him earlier; otherwise he could have saved some for me.*



Liu Zheng



Liu Zheng

**Picture 5: Gate of Ghosts (Fengdu, Sichuan, 1999)**

*There are two “ghost towns” [guicheng] in China, and I have visited both. I spent more time in the one at Fengdu in Sichuan, which is older and has better sculptures. I was fascinated by these sculptures, which depict all sorts of tortures and punishments in hell. Men and women are sawed and cut open; their broken limbs and twisted torsos are painted with gaudy colors. Not all these images are based on reality, of course. But the idea of making a hell on earth has prompted people to invent them.*

*I found this group of miniatures in a small chamber next to the main hall. It shows a crowd rushing through the Gate of Ghosts [Guimenguan] to escape hell. Normally this gate only allows ghosts to go in, not to come out. So the sculpture actually represents an exceptional occurrence: some ancient craftsmen must have imagined the event for the ghosts’ sake. The ghosts are young and old. You can see them stretching their deformed bodies toward the outside, shouting and struggling. There’s an underground policeman who tries to stop them, but to no avail.*



Liu Zheng

**Picture 6: Nanjing Massacre (Nanjing, Jiangsu, 1999)**

*For several years, I've been traveling around China photographing the so-called visual marvels of human culture [renwen jingguan]. These are large sculptural complexes based on famous novels, myths, or historical events; each has hundreds of life-size figures in several dozen tableaux. They became extremely popular in the eighties—thousands of them were set up throughout the country to attract tourists. But people soon lost interest in them. Nowadays, probably no more than a hundred are still in business.*

*The sculptures in these visual marvels are so bad that they're interesting. You find them in big cities as well as in suburbs and county towns, often housed in underground tunnels, caves, or windowless halls constructed for private tours. They're painstakingly made to look like real people. They seduce audiences by appealing to their darkest fantasies and curiosities. Sex is the hottest thing, of course. But instead of romance, you find adultery and rape. Other tableaux exhibit human bodies—bodies being dissected, butchered, and skinned, all in gruesome detail. These scenes nauseate me. I only photograph the images that strike me as surreal—it's as though they are projecting people's unspeakable fantasies onto mirror images.*

**Picture 7: Three Deaf-Mute Girls (Shenyang, Liaoning, 1999)**

*These girls belong to Shenyang's Acrobatic Troupe of the Disabled [Canjiren zajituan]. Others actors and actresses in the troupe include dwarfs, giants, cripples, and boys and girls with severed limbs. The troupe is not an official institution. Several years ago a local businessman wanted to do something good for society and established it. But after a series of financial crises he abandoned the project. Now it's run by its director, a good-looking woman who was disabled by polio when she was a child.*

*This troupe has become rather famous in Shenyang. It's often been mentioned in the local media and has even once traveled abroad. The actors and actresses seem innocent and happy when you first meet them, always running around and giggling. But when you get to know them better, you find that they're extremely vulnerable and in a constant state of worry. An acrobat has a short professional life—none of them can hope to stay in the troupe after reaching twenty-five or thirty. So they all try to save money, yet they earn so little—10 to 20 yuan [about \$1.25 to \$2.50] for a night's performance.*



Liu Zheng

**Picture 8: Wandering Performers on Mt. Wutai (Wutai, Shanxi, 1998)**

*Mt. Wutai is a Buddhist holy site, and I have found myself returning to it year after year. The temples there are so peaceful and unworldly. I always imagine that one of these temples is my final destination and that I will find it one of these days.*

*I also like to watch other people who come to this place. Do they feel that this is their destination as well? I'm not talking about tourists, whose noisy presence only pollutes the mountain. I'm speaking about people who come on foot. I met a small performance troupe with half a dozen young men, some of them handicapped. They did a traditional routine in front of the temple compounds, things like sword swallowing and spurning fire out of their mouths. I couldn't take my eyes off the drummer. Clearly a person with mental problems, he was so absorbed in his inner psyche that the whole outside world, including the performance he was accompanying—it all seemed irrelevant to him.*



Liu Zheng

**Picture 9: Woman Poet (Beijing, 1998)**

*A friend of mine heard I like to photograph unusual subjects, so he introduced her to me. To arouse my interest, he told me she was the ugliest woman he had ever met.*

*We became friends. She is from Manchuria. Like so many members of the floating population\* who come to Beijing from various provinces, she does all kinds of odd jobs to make a living. She tells me that she is a poet. But I haven't read any of her poems. I know that she does write, but writes junk novels—murder and sex, that sort of thing—for quick cash. I said to her that I wanted to photograph her naked, so she posed for me. Some people consider her abnormal because of her looks. But she is totally sane and intelligent.*

*\* The term floating population refers to the huge agricultural population that has left home to seek work. A majority of these people go to large cities; others wander around from place to place. This large-scale migration is caused by the restructuring of China's economy from a central-planning system to a market-controlled system.*



Liu Zheng

**Picture 10: Brain Tumor Patient (Beijing, 1995)**

*He was young, only in his early twenties. He had a brain tumor and only a few weeks to live. I met him in China's first "hospital for dying people" [linzhong yiyuan]. This institution was founded in 1992 near the Fragrant Hills in Beijing's western suburbs, but since then it has relocated twice, first to Wukesong and then to Yutingqiao near Fangzhuang.*

*This is another place I visit regularly. Here you find people whose fate has been decided—their illnesses have been pronounced incurable, and the only future they face is death. Although it's called a hospital, it's no longer a place for healing; it's simply a waiting place for the final moment. The doctors' and nurses' medical knowledge is now useless; they're like keepers of a "death inn" who watch their guests come and go without much emotional disturbance. Even family members tend to cut down on their visits once they send their dying relatives here. In that sense, the place is also a provisional tomb.*

*I went to talk to this patient. He could still speak and smile. I heard him saying: "Big brother, you are the only one who's nice to me." He told this to other people as well.*



Liu Zheng

**Picture 11: Statue along the Spirit Road of a Royal Mausoleum (Yixian, Hebei, 1995)**

*I have always been fascinated by tombs, which are the only places where silence achieves its full meaning. I was drawn to this particular statue probably because it looked so fresh. It must at least be a hundred years old, but all the patterns on the figure's clothes are still so new, and its face is plump and even seems moist. But the face is totally blank; the smile has neither feeling nor meaning in it. He's an annoyingly healthy figure in the desolate winter landscape, when the living things around him have all perished.*

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Liu Zheng