

their *melancholy*  
is also my *melancholy*.  
my *melancholy* is also theirs

I first became aware of Muge on Flickr.com when I was searching for artists to visit in 2008 during a research trip to Chongqing China, with colleagues from QUAD. I wanted to meet someone real, on the ground and working on their own terms, outside of the mainstream – someone of the underground so to speak. ‘*To be a great artist you must not be afraid to be hungry*’ Muge from Chengdu and his friends from all over Schezuan province are just this, they have committed to great hardship, taken the risk to believe in themselves enough to become photographers in a place where opportunities are scarce, competition is high, materialism is fashionable and visible individualism is a treacherous endeavor.

Fortunately as a consequence of our encounter on flickr and then a meeting in Chongqing I was able to invite Muge to the UK to participate in *FORMAT* International Photography Festival – *PHOTOCINEMA*, in the title exhibition with his work *Silence*. For Muge his photographs often toy with the cinematic/filmic in ways that allow him to expand into imagined sequence the tension of which the before and the after offer a temporal dimension in the mind of the viewer, a place where the narrative of the onlooker is vitalized. Parallels can be drawn between Muge in relation to the influence of film Director Jia Zhangke and photographers Walker Evans, Robert Frank, Martin Parr and August Sander. Most clearly perhaps in the kinds of subjects he focuses on that mirrors Sanders series *People of the 20th Century*. In this Sander aims to show a cross-section of society during the Weimar Republic. The series is divided into seven sections: Farmers, Skilled Tradesman, Women, Classes and Professions, Artists, City, and The Last People (homeless people, veterans and so on). By 1945 Sander’s archive included over 40,000 images. Muge is part way there already.

Muge’s recent works titled *Silence* and *Going Home* are perhaps the most autobiographical series. Muge has a unique point of view, different from the hundreds of western photographers who have tried to represent the region. He drifts through the city and country side mapping people and place, he can relate directly to the dislocated people of the Three Gorges region along the banks of the Yangtze River, because it is where he has lived all his life. Chinese people respond differently to a westerner with a camera, Muge can pass unnoticed or at least his presence does not cause a local reaction. He is able to look people in the eye on literally level terms, in so many ways he is part of the people he represents.

The notion of home throughout Muge’s work takes the idea of home as something that is the starting point of life it is a refuge, it is the last place that would shut you out, it is the romanticized sanctuary of belonging. The desire to return home becomes much stronger, just like a dream enchanting the mind every night. Only by returning home can that lukewarm sense of loss be eliminated.

Thousands of people from China each year migrate to the cities and beyond to find work but as the Chinese saying goes – *even leaves return to their roots*.<sup>(2)</sup> What can you do if your home has been submerged and your family, culture and community fractured and relocated? Where do you go, when even the geography has changed? Two extremes seem to emerge in Muge’s images of deep sorrow and that of numbness.

Some may say that Muge’s images are filled with *Saudade* a Portugese word that carries a fatalist tone and a repressed knowledge that the object of longing might really never return and in my understanding of it – for home and nostalgia for lost dreams. But I also believe them to be beyond

longing reflecting the rapid changes in China as felt by the people. Representing the individuals swept along and those left behind literally by the tidal wave of progress from the Three Gorges Dam project and economic developments – the utopian future in spite of the present. Photography becomes a tool to turn memories into something tangible an attempt of remembrance, to keep one's memories intact. The changes for many have been too hard to bear, longing turns to numbness where there is regret in that we no longer know what we long for, and if we ever did.

He has an obsession with people and the vernacular, people and place. His are contradictory emotive pictures full of emotion and latent motive and they are truly wonder-full in their numbness. They are meaning rich and in looking at them, spending time with them you cannot help to feel that part of your memory has been etched with the people and places as seen through Muge's eyes, that then become your own. Despite acknowledging the contradiction between the recorded image and the inaccuracies of human visual memory our dislocated biographies cannot help but become connected for a moment.

Within his photography lies a desire crystallised by the word 'regarder' a dynamic coupling of the act of looking (regard) holding in your mind and eyes; and preserving (garder) documenting and evidencing. This perfectly summarises the intent in the photographs. Muge's images both preserve and reflect, poetic moments in time and in memory of the world that he inhabits. He wants the memories of his images to endure. Numbed and unconscious of the camera, recording pain and indifference for posterity the memory of those moments will have to cling to the pictures that remain. They are also an honest reflection of his unique view of his homeland, he has a special eye for the sublime and melancholic of the lost – perhaps a reflection of his own soul.. however to meet him you will understand that he naturally prioritises joyfulness over sorrow. Muge has refined his technique to represent a sense of place that is greater and more compacted than the geography of everyday life, it is a transformative world beyond the facade. Dostoyevsky was known to have said that 'Beauty will save the world'. To this end these images come from a desire not only to elucidate the incredible but also from an ambition to examine and find the transcendent, rather than represent the beauty of mere surfaces.

1. Louise Clements – Artistic Director of QUAD [www.derbyquad.co.uk](http://www.derbyquad.co.uk) and FORMAT International Photography Festival [www.formatfestival.com](http://www.formatfestival.com)
2. Confucius institute online.