

Chen Qiulin: The Empty City

Chen Qiulin (b. 1975) is one of the leading figures in China's younger generation of artists working in new media. Her video installations explore the social impact of China's rapid urban development, through the lens of her personal experience. They articulate the tensions between the individual and society, inherent and constructed identity, and past and present (both for the self and the nation as a whole) that have resulted from the unprecedented emergence of China as a major international superpower in the last four decades.

Chen grew up in the small city of Wanzhou, which was submerged under the Yangtze River by the controversial Three Gorges Dam project in 2003. Wanzhou's entire population was relocated, and the remaining parts of the region that are still above water now have been absorbed into the Municipality of Chongqing. In *The Empty City*, she returns to the remnants of Wanzhou, while at the same time coming to terms with her new life in Chongqing. The title is a contradiction: the "empty city" of Chongqing (now including Wanzhou) is China's largest direct-administrated municipality, with an estimated population of 34 million people. However, in the videos Chongqing becomes a canvas upon which the artist projects her own sense of alienation, unmasking its veneer as a vibrant, contemporary urban center to reveal the ghosts of the past just beneath its surface (in the case of Wanzhou, literally beneath the surface of the river).

A particularly poignant example of this is the Wanzhou city park, which due to its location on a hill remained unsubmerged by the dam. The park was once an important community center for Wanzhou, but now has been virtually abandoned. Chen recalls stories from her childhood of the "shadow of a woman" that people believed haunted the park. Several of the videos take place in the park, wherein Chen wanders aimlessly, as her childhood memories and those of the people that once organized their lives around the park now join with the "shadow," which becomes a symbol for the past whose lingering presence haunts the official re-imagining of Chongqing (and China as a whole) with its face turned firmly towards a bright future of economic and political confidence.

The Empty City is at once both intensely personal and also socially relevant, highlighting the impact of modernization and internationalization on both individual and collective identity. The issues at its core speak directly to the fundamental struggle of China (and its people) to reinvent itself in response to a rapidly changing world, but also to the larger cross-cultural struggle of the individual to preserve and continue to find relevance in memories of a lost past in the face of technological and social progress.