

## Soul Stealer

Photographs of ZENG Han + YANG Changhong

Essay by: Zeng Han

This series originates from some dreams the two of us had. What we were discussing at that time was how to use photography to find our origins in some “dreamlands” rooted in history. Then, in the year 2006 we came across the local “Landplay” performed in some villages in Guizhou (Southwest of China), which is considered “the live fossil of Chinese opera”. Hopefully, by using this old play, we could rebuild the ancient warfare scenes, and let the actors connect with and even become historical figures through their masks. In this way, photography becomes an amazing time machine, moving through different eras in history.

However, as we went deeper and deeper into the project, and the images were gradually emerging, we realized that our cameras were not only just simple time machines, but the act of photographing resembled more and more the act of soul-stealing, as in the early years when photographing had just been invented and was considered a device which could manipulate souls. For example, the character in the portrait in which the Landplay actor holds the mask is actually just a farmer when he takes the mask off. However, as the actor faces the camera lens, he shows exactly the same expression in his eyes as the spirit beneath the mask. Several layers of time merge together as the shutter opens for a few hundredths of a second; meanwhile, ancient spirits are able to penetrate through and stay still along side the real people on the film. Besides taking the portraits of the Landplay performers, we were able to bring different troupes together and have them perform the battle scenes of different time periods in a natural setting, which turns out to be a fairly large scene. Under such conditions, those ancient spirits would gather together from all the various times. During the whole process of photographing, we did not make any changes to any of the characters, their props, or the surroundings. What we did was only to arrange everything in one image, magically integrating time, humanity, society, culture, nature and the mysterious afterworld thanks to photography.

After finishing the “Landplay” series, we headed in a more interesting direction: we wanted to explore through photographs, how the society, culture, environment and politics influence and control people, and what the relationship is between actual persons and their spirits. That’s how the “Cosplay” series was shot in the same way. This time, we focused our camera on a group of teenagers, and the fast-developing young city of Shenzhen as the backdrop. COSPLAY, which stands for Costume Play, refers to the comic book fans dressing up as anime or manga characters. The Chinese youngsters in this series are generally all high school students. By making the costumes and dressing themselves, acting as the anime or manga characters (mostly from Japanese cartoons), they change themselves from a common boy or girl into a super hero or a devil, and with some strong spiritual and cultural hints, they enter an invented virtual world unrestricted from daily ordinary life. In fact, they have realized part of their dreams just by standing in front of the camera. This “surrealistic” image displays the boundless possibilities of photography as an art medium to probe into the relationship between the present and the future on all levels.

The staging of the “Landsplay” and “COSPLAY” series was intended to invoke images of “soul stealing” which is an age-old hypnotherapy among Chinese civilians. When children are frightened by something and lose consciousness, the elders will go to the scene at night and call the child’s

name, so that the “lost” spirit would hear the calls and come back to the body. Our photography is actually the same as “soul stealing” in the image experiments, summoning history, culture and humanities. Philip Kuhn, the famous American Sinologist, in his book “Soulstealer”, describes the enormous Chinese Sorcery Scare in 1768 during the Qianlong Emperor's reign. The book discloses the crisis of the so-called “times of prosperity”, and the inherent reason why the old China tends towards its latter-day tragic fate.

Nowadays, the new China seems to move towards to the new “times of prosperity”, but the crisis should not be ignored. Just like what we exhibited in these two series, the villages where the landplay originated become more and more hollow, since young people tend to rush out to the metropolis, leaving only the old generations to sustain the traditions. While in the big cities, the young generation whose soul is tightly held by trendy iconic culture, merely cares for the vogues brought on by globalization, and knows nothing about the history and traditions of their own nation.

In 2007 and 2008 we worked on parts three and four of the series, which complete the Soul Stealer series: “Mulian Opera” in Hunan province and “World of Warcraft” in Chongqing, which complete the whole structure of “soulstealer” series.

Mulian opera is a traditional opera type performed by Chinese folk troupes based on the legend of “Monk Mulian Saving His Mother”. As the first verified story in Chinese opera history, this play has been considered the origin of Chinese opera. Being documented first as a classic Buddhist text, it tells the story of Monk Mulian, who, to save his mother from condemnation in hell, headed west to seek help from Buddha, who touched by the Mulian's pure heart, allowed him to become a monk, and bestowing him with the feast of lanterns and a stone which protected him through the eighteen levels of hell and finally reunited him with his mother. The diversified roles of gods and spirits in this play reflect the supernatural or religious images of the spirit world, of samsara and retribution, pictured by Chinese tradition. We asked the Hunan Shaoyang Qi opera troupe to perform simultaneously several different plays in front of a 400-year-old tower, all together forming a scene with elements of the human world, heaven and hell. During the shoot, local farmers were burning stalks nearby, which caused the dense smoke that ended up adding a special effect to the photographs.

“World of Warcraft” is currently one of the most popular internet games worldwide, which integrates exciting and mysterious elements of war, wizardry, religion, demons and monsters, and making an enormous number of cyber players crazily addicted. The group of performers we photographed in their World of Warcraft costumes in Chongqing is a very well-known Chinese cosplay team called “Century Noah”, most of whose members are high schools students or students from the local Fine Arts University. These youths make themselves all the costumes and props for role playing, including the silicone muscles. The location for the shoot was the side of Yangtze River, with the Chongqing city skyline as a backdrop, providing a landscape for these prehistoric and supernatural “monsters” to emerge from the river and rush to ‘attack’ this modern city.

After thinking over the historical and cultural problems in our urgent needs, The “Soul Stealer” series will go beyond the origin of our own reality and enter the “superhuman third dimension”. We shall firmly persist in using photography to reach our goal, which maybe the reason reckoned as the instrument that absorbed souls.

## 叫魂 - 曾翰 + 杨长虹

文：曾翰

拍摄这个系列，是从一些梦境出发的，那时我们在讨论的，是我们怎样通过摄影在一源于历史的梦境寻找自身的血脉根源。于是我们便找到了贵州的山庄里的地戏，我们希望通过用地戏这样一种被称为“中国戏剧活化石”的古老剧种，来重现不同朝代的古代战争场景，以及扮演者通过手中的面具与历史人物相通灵，让摄影成为一种时间机器，游弋于不同的历史节点。

但随着拍摄的深入，以及拍摄所得影像的慢慢浮现，我们的摄影已经不是某种简单的再现梦境或历史的时间机器，我们越来越发现摄影正像它刚被发明的时代，被当时的人们所认为的，是一种偷窃灵魂的行为，或者说是一种可以控制灵魂的装置。在地戏扮演者手持面具的肖像中，脱下戏服就是普通农民的扮演者，在手持他所扮演的历史人物的面具面对照相机镜头的那一刻，他的眼神和表情竟然与面具所刻绘的完全相同，也就是说通过摄影的几十分之一秒的行为，不仅时间交融了，那些远古的灵魂更是在此刻穿透各种界限，与真实的人一起停驻在照相胶片中；而在将不同戏队同置于一个真实的当下的自然环境中，演绎不同朝代的战争故事的大场景拍摄中，那些远古的魂灵更是前所未有地从不同时间的节点出发汇集到一起。整个拍摄的过程，我们没有对所有的人、物和环境做出一点改动和再造，我们只是将真实的人、物和环境重新组合在一个画面之内，用最简单的摄影方式制造出一个融合时间、人性、社会、文化、自然以及不可言说的灵界的图片。

地戏组照拍摄完成后，我们这个系列的摄影走向一个更有趣更开阔的方向：通过摄影，对历史和未来进行时间向度上的探询，对社会、文化、环境、政治之于人的影响控制探讨作为实体的人与灵魂之间的互为关系。于是，我们继续用同样的方式拍摄了动漫角色扮演（COSPLAY）组照，这次我们将镜头对准一群中国当代都市中的十几岁的年轻人，拍摄背景选择了与这些年轻人一样年轻的城市深圳。所谓COSPLAY，是指热爱漫画的人将自己装扮成漫画中的人物形象，并用各种道具和肢体语言演绎漫画情节。这些大部分都是在校中学生的中国小孩，自己缝制或定造服饰，自己化妆，扮演成外国漫画（绝大部分是日本漫画）角色，通过COSPLAY行为，自己就可以从一个普通人摇身一变为无所不能的漫画英雄（或恶魔），在某种强烈的心理和文化暗示下，超脱出日常生活环境的束缚进入一个可以任意想象为所欲为的虚拟世界。而这一行为的目的，似乎在他们面对照相机的那一刻已经得以实现。而在一个近似虚拟的城市上空，将各个虚拟的漫画场景一起并置其中，形成了一个以现实的人与环境组合而成的超现实画面，在对现实与虚拟，当下与未来等各层面上关系的探讨和挖掘，展现了摄影这一艺术媒介的无限可能性。

地戏与COSPLAY这两组照片的成形，也使得“叫魂”这个影像系列的拍摄思路慢慢成形。“叫魂”，是中国民间最为原始的一种催眠暗示治疗法，当小孩受惊吓后神志不清，长辈就在夜晚去到受惊吓的地方大声呼唤小孩的名字，使其“走失”的灵魂听到召唤后回归肉身。在这一系列的影像实验中，摄影就像是“叫魂”，而它召唤的远远不止是一个小孩的灵魂，更多的泛指了历史、文化及人性等等。美国著名的汉学家孔飞力（Philip Kuhn）最重要的代表作就是叫《叫魂（SoulStealers）》，他描述了一场发生于1768年乾隆盛世下的席卷全国的妖术大恐慌，以“叫魂”事件揭示了所谓盛世下的危机，同时也揭示了传统中国走向近现代悲剧性命运的内在根源。当下的中国，似乎正在重新迎来一个盛世，但其下的危机同样不容忽视，就像在这两组照片中，地戏所处的农村越来越空心化，年轻人都涌向大城市，只剩下老人苦苦支撑传统，所谓传承几乎难以为续；而在城市，年轻的一代只关心全球化带来的潮流，对自身的历史传统一无所知并且不关心，那只所谓潮流偶像文化的巨掌掌握着他们的灵魂。“叫魂”系列在完成了当下最迫切的历史与文化的反思后，将会更加延伸至人类自身根源乃至超人类的第三维空间，我们也将更加坚定选择摄影这一媒介进行探索，也许，这就是为什么当初摄影会被认为是吸纳灵魂的装置。