

# CHEN CHIEH-JEN: LINGCHI: ECHOES OF

## A HISTORICAL PHOTOGRAPH

The camera lingers closely on the victim's skyward face. Within a suffocating crowd the condemned man is tied to a post. A torturer, his assistant and a western photographer accompany him. Taiwanese artist Chen Chieh Jen's 'Lingchi - Echoes of a Historical Photograph' is mostly silent, black and white, slowed down and beyond the aesthetic of the spectacle of death. It responds to Georges Bataille's questionable identification of a perplexing smile<sup>1</sup>, an expression marked by both ecstasy and suffering on the face of the victim in the original 1905 photographs. Weakened by starvation and in a state of semi-conscious euphoria brought on by the administration of liquid opium, it is no wonder that the victim's expression is inscrutable, and that in this state of intoxication he appears to be psychologically elsewhere, laconically beyond the body, in ekstasis.

For over a decade Chieh-jen's art has responded to physical, psychological and historical trauma. Chieh-jen creates, appropriates, manipulates and re-presents archival materials of punishments, the struggle of minorities and the violence of state and colonial powers. In the meticulous restaging of lingchi, Chieh-jen responds to one of a series of photographs taken on April 10, 1905, when China was in the last throes of administering lingchi as a form of corporal punishment. Various referred to as 'death by a hundred' or 'a thousand cuts', 'death by dismemberment', 'the lingering death' or 'slow process', lingchi takes shape in Chieh-jen's work as a punishment that transcends the physicality of the body to reveal a long history of violence, injustice, oppression and atrocities inflicted on a population and land.

In Chieh-jen's interpretation the body is objectified for the colonial gaze; hence the piercing double lens of the camera that mirrors the wounds cut into the victim's chest. The camera is the portal to a wealth of assumptions and myopic readings of Chinese punishments, equating them with European Middle Ages rather than understanding them within their own cultural context, with their own due process. As historian Jerome Bourgon writes,

Chinese punitive practices were perceived, interpreted and described through a Western framework which no common notion like 'Christianity', 'modern humanitarianism' or 'colonial racism' accurately accounts for.<sup>2</sup>

This viewpoint is complicit in the broader interpretation of lingchi by Chieh-jen, where the bruised and broken body becomes a metaphor of Taiwanese history, politics, society and the effects of colonialism and globalisation. The Western viewpoint is not just represented by the photographer, however. Chieh-jen's filming of the victim clearly references the filming of Maria Falconetti's face in the death scene of the 1928 film 'The Passion of Joan of Arc'. Chieh-jen's is a layered dialogue between East and West, where he employs a piece of classic Western cinema to challenge the gaze of Western Christianity.



Image credit: Chen Chieh-jen: Lingchi - Echoes of a Historical Photograph

As the camera surrealistically peers into the victim's wounds it is not only about the voyeuristic fascination with violence, but also more presciently about state and colonial violence. We time travel to the present and through the wounds we are shown gutted and desolate buildings of significance in the history of pain and trauma.

They include the ruins of Yuanmingyuan - a palace of the Qing Dynasty that administered state affairs (including lingchi); a site in Harbin where medical experiments were performed on Chinese subjects; the RCA production factory which leaked toxic chemicals into ground water and led to a high incidence of cancer amongst employees; the Green island prison for political prisoners; and a former textile factory that was shut down without notice, leaving thousands of employees jobless. A number of these employees appear in the video, seen through the gaping wounds. Standing amongst them is a man whose shirt is pulled open to reveal two bloody chest wounds. The pain persists from the past echoing into the present.

Chieh-jen's 'Lingchi' is a layered philosophical commentary; it is a spatial and temporal exercise in the genealogy of pain, different types of pain, folding past into present, body into society and history into contemporaneity. It is also a fictional re-imagining of the original photograph, a construction that plays with the codes of now and then.

**Laetitia Wilson, exhibition curator**

1. See Bataille, Georges, 'Tears of Eros', City Light Books, San Francisco, 1989, pp.204-207

2. Bourgon, Jerome, 'Chinese Executions: Visualising their Differences with European Supplices', European Journal of East Asian Studies, Vol.2, No.1, p.183