

Chi-Wen Gallery



Chi-Wen Gallery at LOOP Barcelona, June 2-4, 2016

Artist | Chien-Chi Chang

*Escape from North Korea, Single-channel, HD Video, Colour, Sound,
5min 40sec, 2009*



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The exodus of North Korean defectors into China began in late 1990s after a severe famine that destroyed at least one million of its 23 million people. Once they cross the border to China, they'll be in hiding and waiting to embark on an extremely secretive, dangerous escape route known as Asia's Underground Railroad from northern China all the way to Laos, crossing Mekong River, to Thailand and finally to South Korea.

"In North Korea, crossing the border without permission is punishable by three to five years in a prison labor camp, and conspiring with missionaries or others to reach South Korea is considered treason, with offenders starved, tortured, and sometimes publicly executed. Human rights organizations and various foreign leaders, particularly in the United States and the European Union, are urging China to honor its international agreements by treating the North Koreans as refugees, a status they're entitled to because of the punishments they face if deported. But China maintains that the defectors are illegal "economic migrants." In the months leading up to the 2008 Olympics, Chinese authorities intensified their efforts to apprehend defectors, capturing and deporting dozens, perhaps hundreds, a week. Yet they keep coming.

The arduous and unpredictable 5,000-kilometer plus journey which is full of obstacle course of checkpoints, informants and treacherous terrains can take weeks, months or even years. Chinese police routinely hunt for North Koreans attempting to escape cross-country. Police crackdowns can net hundreds of victims. If they are caught while escaping in China and/or Laos, they will be repatriated to North Korea, facing severe labor camps or capital punishment.

Magnum photographer Chien-Chi Chang who can not speak Korean managed to communicate with the defectors solely via eye contact and travelled with them to document the darkest journey from border town Tumen, China, over mountain ranges of Laos, into Thailand and eventually their resettlement in Seoul between 2007 and 2009. To date, he has continued to document the plight of North Korean defectors.

About the Artist

Primarily using photography as his artistic medium, **Chien-Chi Chang (b.1961)** explores alienation and connection between people in contemporary society by developing long-term, interactive relationships with the subjects. In his earlier, well-known series *The Chain* (1993-1999) which was exhibited at the Taiwan Pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 2001 and the Bienal de São Paulo in 2002, Chang creates life-sized portraits of patients at Taiwan's Long Fa Temple psychiatric hospital.

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His 2002 series *I do I do I do* exposes subtle societal factors that underpin marriage using a photo album format. In his 2005 series *Double Happiness*, Chang uses a straight-forward format to document the marriage brokerage process used by Vietnamese brides and Taiwanese grooms. Starting in 1992, Chang became interested in themes related to the dispersion of individuals or families from their homeland, and in the 20 years hence, followed the lives of illegal immigrants in New York City's Chinatown who left China as a matter of survival. Entitled *China Town* and still in progress, the series was exhibited in the artist's mid-career survey *Doubleness* at the National Museum of Singapore in 2008, and at the Taiwan Pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 2009. In 2007, Chang travelled with North Korean defectors from Northeast China to Thailand, documenting their lives for his work ***Escape from North Korea, which won the Canadian AnthropoGraphia Award for Human Rights in 2011***. In recent years Chang has expanded his medium to include sound and the moving images, which has enriched his photography-based narratives with additional, multiple elements.

Chang received his bachelor's degree from Soochow University in 1984, and his master's from Indiana University in 1990. He began a professional career as a photojournalist in 1991, and has worked for both the *Seattle Times* and the *Baltimore Sun*. He joined the world famous photographic cooperative Magnum Photos in 1995 and became a full member in 2001.

About Chi-Wen Gallery

Founded in 2004 by Chi-Wen Huang, Chi-Wen Gallery is one of Taiwan's leading galleries, showing the best of contemporary Taiwanese art with a focus on video and photography. The gallery is dedicated to supporting emerging artists with curatorial projects that explore the most cutting-edge subjects and has been actively participating in local and international art fairs. As such Chi-Wen Gallery is very much connected with today's art and represents artists whose work continues to grow in historical importance.

Over the last decade Chi-Wen Gallery has fostered the careers of a diverse group of internationally renowned artists, both emerging and established, whose practices transformed the way art is made and presented in Taiwan today. These artists include Chen Chieh-Jen, Chien-Chi Chang, Chen Shun-Chu, Hung Tung-Lu, Jawshing Arthur Liou, Peng Hung-Chih, Tusi Kuang-Yu, Wu Tien-Chang, Yao Jui-Chung, Yuan Goang-Ming, Yin-Ju Chen & James T. Hong, Yu Cheng-Ta and among others.