



周雁冰
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沈绮颖，1978年生于新加坡。“不安于室”的70后新加坡女子，新加坡女子中学校友，曾担任《海峡时报》中国特派员。2010年，32岁的沈绮颖“抛弃”安稳的人生与薪水，把家安在中国北京，当起自由摄影师；去年，她成为第一位受“诺贝尔和平奖”委托办展的本地摄影师；今年四月，她赢得 Getty Images and Chris Hondros Fund Award（盖蒂图像与克里斯·洪德罗斯基金会）；一个月前，她受邀加入殿堂级的“Magnum”（马格南）摄影师行列，是我国第一人。

本地女佣、山西矿工、北京民族、核武、全球用沙短款、马来西亚紧急法令……

沈绮颖镜头下尽是触动敏感神经的社会历史课题及弱势群体景象。

这名被家人称作“爱多管闲事”的女子说：

我们把头脑交给政府。

我们这一代缺乏政治意识，



沈绮颖：我们把头脑交给政府

摄影

同事龙国雄的手机屏幕上，是他和沈绮颖两年前的合照。沈绮颖右手大拇指指着厚厚的纱布，龙国雄左手则拄着拐杖。两人面对镜头在大医院的走廊笑得很快，苦中作乐。

沈绮颖说，有，她也有膝盖疼痛和腰椎间盘突出症。所有这些因背负沉重摄影器材所付出的代价，都在她精瘦小巧的身体上刻下印记。

我们这一行

因为那一场意外，沈绮颖断断续续有一年时间不能手握摄影机。经历了两次手术多次物理治疗以后，手指还是歪的，因骨头断了，无法痊愈。记者看着她手上明显的疤痕问她，如果那天你看到了不在摄影的标志，你会遵守吗？她眼睛亮起来，露出调皮笑容说：“你知道的，我们这一行……”就不再说下去。

隐晦抽象图像呈献核设施

受伤之后，沈绮颖经历反常期。今年即将步入40岁关口的她，当时间自己，人生接下来的年月要怎么过？还是像以前那样边跑边“播”，快速进攻吗？她最终决定沉淀这些年作为新闻和摄影记者的积累，放慢速度，通过研究与思考，深度呈献课题。

就像已在那威奥斯陆诺贝尔和平中心开展的“Ban the Bomb”（禁止炸弹）摄影展，从委约到开展，去年底仅仅两个月时间她跑了中朝边界与美国六大州，走了6000公里路拍了几百张照片，以影像引导观众反思核武课题。

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只能对信徒传道有什么用

坚信长大后要做有用的人

毕业于伦敦政治经济学院沈绮颖将自己的成长，归功于新加坡女子学校几位老师的教诲和个性使然。“我十几岁就觉得自己比较有能力和感兴趣的是写作和摄影，有点强迫症地

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雪山水用于制造长崎原子弹的B原子弹。(龙国雄摄)

拉萨尔艺术学院展出沈绮颖影像装置

沈绮颖在挪威奥斯陆诺贝尔和平中心展出的“Ban the Bomb”摄影展

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Sim Chi Yin was born in 1978 in Singapore. An adventurous Singaporean woman, she is an alumnus of the Singapore Chinese Girls School, and was also a correspondent for *The Straits Times* in China. In 2010, Chi Yin, then 32, left her comfortable life and stable career behind, to resettle in Beijing and become an independent photographer.

In 2017, she became the first Singaporean to be commissioned as a Nobel Peace Prize photographer. In April 2018, she won the Getty Images and Chris Hondros Fund Award. One month ago, she became the first Singaporean to be inducted as a Magnum Photographer.

She is particularly interested in topics such as domestic workers in Singapore, mine workers in Shaanxi, basement-dwellers in Beijing, nuclear weapons, the global sand shortage, and the Malayan emergency etc. Chi Yin focuses on both sensitive social and historical issues, as well as the plight of the underprivileged through her photo lens.

Nicknamed a busybody by her loved ones, Chi Yin feels that her generation of Singaporeans are not politically conscious, preferring to let the government do the thinking instead.

Image caption:

A video installation by Sim Chi Yin at LASALLE College of the Arts
The Cascade Range in Washington is shown here; its spring water was used to produce the atomic bomb detonated in Nagasaki. (Photography by Long Guoxiong)

Sim Chi Yin: We are contented to leave the thinking to our government

My colleague, Long Guoxiong, shows me a photo of Chi Yin and him on his mobile phone, taken two years ago. Chi Yin's right thumb is heavily bandaged while Guoxiong is on crutches, post-knee surgery. Both have cheerful smiles on their faces despite being in the hospital. Chi Yin shares that she has also suffered from knee problems and lumbar disc herniations in the past – battle scars inflicted on her lithe and petite frame from years of lugging bulky photography equipment around with her.

Chi Yin's thumb was injured during her time in Tumen, a Chinese city that borders North Korea. She was stationed there as a correspondent of *Le Monde*, the second largest newspaper in France, to photograph economic activities between China and North Korea.

In her account of the incident to Western media, she said that she entered Tumen with her colleague in a taxi. Failing to notice a sign which explicitly stated that photography is prohibited, she instinctively started taking photos upon seeing a female North Korean worker. Unexpectedly, the worker dashed forward to grab Chi Yin's camera. Then, several female workers quickly surrounded the taxi. After a tussle, Chi Yin lost her camera to them and injured her thumb, causing her to bleed profusely.

This was a most unexpected turn of events. Till this day, Chi Yin cannot forget the hatred and obstinance she saw in the eyes of the female North Korean worker.

My line of work

Due to that incident, Chi Yin had difficulties holding her camera properly for more than a year. After two operations and numerous physiotherapy sessions, her thumb is still crooked, and is unable to recover fully.

Looking at the obvious scar on her hand, I asked whether she would have heeded the sign on that fateful day if she had seen it. Her eyes lit up, and with a mischievous smile she replied, "As you know, in my line of work..."

Abstract photos of North Korean nuclear facilities

That incident and the passing years made Chi Yin, who is turning 40 this year, reflect on how she wants to spend the next phase of her life. Does she still want to be the gung-ho photographer who goes all out to take shots around the world? In the end, she decided to take a step back to reflect and research. She wanted to make use of her wealth of experience as a news and photojournalist to provide insightful opinions on issues.

One way she has done so, is through her involvement in the *Ban the Bomb* photography exhibition, currently being held at the Nobel Peace Centre in Oslo, Norway.

To prepare for the exhibition, Chi Yin travelled 6000 km in a short period of two months, to the border between China and North Korea, as well as six states in the US. She took hundreds of photos in the hopes of allowing the public to reflect on nuclear weapons issues through her images.

In order to unveil the mystery surrounding nuclear test sites and nuclear military bases, Chi Yin became absorbed with studying satellite photos, much like an intelligence officer. With assistance from scholars, she managed to locate North Korean nuclear facilities. Entering North Korea to take photos of the facilities was out of the question. Instead, she consulted a map of China to locate the nearest point to the North Korean nuclear facilities on the China-North Korea border. Her shots, of a North Korean watch tower amidst maple leaves, the North Korean city of Manpo at night from across the Yalu river and a landscape shot of North Korea across the Heaven Lake atop Tianshan mountain, evoke a sense of wonder in the viewer, but also provoke questions about the goings-on behind these beautiful façades.

Earlier in her life, Chi Yin visited North Korea twice as a journalist. "My photographs of the North Korean nuclear facilities are more abstract and subtle. I feel that this is a valid approach because the truth is hidden in North Korea. Even when you are there in person, you may not see what you set out to."

Rather surprisingly, the biggest shock of the project for Chi Yin came in the US instead of North Korea.

"On a vast farmland in North Dakota, a pyramid with 'two pairs of eyes' rose from the ground. Built in the 1970s, it was a radar base tasked with detecting USSR fighter planes coming in from the north. The base only operated for a day before being shuttered as it was too costly to operate."

In the US, Chi Yin also met with Yvonne Morris, the former commander of a US nuclear unit. Based in Arizona in the earlier part of the 1980s, Yvonne oversaw the nuclear missiles. She told Chi Yin that had she received orders back then to fire the missiles, she would have obeyed, because it would have meant that the US was under attack.

According to Chi Yin, the Nobel Peace Centre's initial idea was for her to photograph atomic bomb victims in Nagasaki and Hiroshima. "That was an emotion-based approach and I was very familiar with portrait photography. But I decided against

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such a lopsided account and went for landscape shots that are more abstract and subtle instead, so that those visiting the exhibition can ponder the relationship between the individual, society and nuclear weapons.”

“In mainstream media reports, it is often clear who is right and who is wrong, but where do these judgements come from? My hope is for the audience to find their own answers through questioning.”

The exhibition may be underway, and her commission over. However, Chi Yin’s research is still in progress because there are still some unanswered questions in her mind. The day she has no more doubts about the issue of nuclear weapons, she will move on.

What is the point of proselytising to believers?

Growing up in sheltered Singapore, how did Chi Yin end up on the path less travelled? Is it somehow related to her late grandfather who was executed by shooting in China at the age of 38?

Chi Yin’s late grandfather, Shen Huan Sheng, was the principal of a Chinese school in north Malaysia. At the same time, he was the chief editor at the *Ipoh Yit Poh*, a left-wing newspaper. During the Japanese occupation, he participated in the resistance. After the Japanese surrendered, he wrote articles denouncing colonial rule. In 1948, the British declared a state of emergency in Malaya.

This led to his detention and subsequent deportation to his hometown, Meixian in Guangdong. Back in China, he joined the guerrilla faction of the Chinese Communist Party. Following that, he was arrested and executed by Kuomintang troops.

Chi Yin only came to know what happened to her grandfather after she grew up. “My grandfather lost his life because of politics. That’s why my grandmother forbade us from participating in political activities. Therefore, even though my father was born in the 1930s and is a graduate of Nanyang University, my family does not have any political inclinations and is apathetic towards social issues.”

Always wanted to be a useful member of society

A graduate of the London School of Economics and Political Science, Chi Yin attributes her personal development to the guidance of several teachers at the Singapore Chinese Girls School, and her personal character. “During my teenage years, I realised I was more adept at and interested in writing and photography. I was also obsessed with the idea of becoming a useful member of society.”

A “useful member” is not necessarily a “successful person” as defined by society. “Even today, my parents still don’t understand why I resigned from the job that I was doing well in. Even my relatives make fun of me for not having a successful career even though I graduated from a prestigious university.”

Even though her works have appeared in renowned international publications such as *National Geographic*, and *The New Yorker* etc., she has not benefitted financially because the global publishing industry is in the doldrums.

“All I own are several cameras, but I lead a fulfilling life. I chose to live this way, and I am grateful for being able to do so. If my family depended on me to make ends meet, I might not have chosen this path.”

Peaceful dialogue is the best way to win more converts

In October, Chi Yin will head to King’s College in London to begin her Ph.D. studies. She will be looking into the lives of the 30 000 or so civilians who, like her grandfather, were exiled after the British declared a state of emergency in Malaya. In the past few years, she has interviewed more than 20 of them in places such as Malaysia, Laos, and the border between Thailand and Malaysia etc. She recorded

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their oral history, took portrait shots, and also took photos of old photographs and documents. To her, this process to salvage historical records must continue.

For many years, Chi Yin has spoken out on behalf of those in need. As more people start voicing their opinions on diverse issues, sometimes shouting at the top of their voice to be heard over the din, she believes that peaceful dialogue may be the best way to convince others of one's views.

“When you shout, you essentially shut out those whose views differ from yours. This made me think about whether there is a better way to gather people with differing views for a conversation. What is the use of proselytising to those who already believe? What we need to think about is how to bridge the divide.”

Why not set up base in Singapore

Having spent the last 11 years in Beijing, Chi Yin has no plans to leave just yet. I asked why she did not think of setting up base in Singapore.

Bursting out in laughter, Chi Yin said, “Is this a trick question? Can I not answer?” This brought our interview to a close. After the interview, Chi Yin sent me a text message, requesting to thank the Tan Kah Kee foundation for awarding her a

scholarship to defray some of the expenses for her studies. “They would be delighted if you mentioned that in your article,” she wrote.

Indifferent bystanders

When the nuclear weapons photo exhibition came to Singapore, the LASALLE College of the Arts was very enthusiastic while Chi Yin was a bit apprehensive because she felt that even though the nuclear threat and climate change are two of the biggest threats that the world faces at present, Singaporeans may not be particularly interested.

Chi Yin was teaching in the US when the Trump-Kim summit was held in Singapore.

According to her, “What I found interesting were the reactions of fellow Singaporeans. There were numerous strange responses on social media from those who are highly-educated, and active in civil society. Many of them grumbled about the prospect of traffic jams, while others gloated over being spared the inconvenience as they would be overseas. Everyone seemed more concerned about their personal well-being than regional affairs.”

Just before the summit, the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, went on an unplanned night tour in Singapore. This had many Singaporeans scrambling to take photos and videos, and was portrayed in a North Korean documentary as “Singaporeans paying the utmost respect to Kim, and warmly welcoming his visit”. While we were discussing this incident, Chi Yin repeatedly said that “our society is kind of weird”.

According to her, “This is an issue with the political environment. We are more distant from politics because our generation is consciously being depoliticised. Therefore, it is not surprising that younger Singaporeans lack political awareness, be it towards local or foreign politics.”

On the other hand, when US president Donald Trump visited London recently, before heading to Finland to meet Russian president Vladimir Putin, the locals engaged in debates, and demonstrated their support or opposition for their policies or behaviour.

“Here in Singapore, we would regard them as celebrities! We do not reflect sufficiently on current affairs. Every society has people like that, but a freer society will have diverse types, including the politically-conscious who will voice their views. Singaporeans are too sheltered, and we are content to leave the thinking to our

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government, instead of getting our hands dirty. That's how we end up as indifferent bystanders."

Event Listings:

1. Photography Exhibition: *Most People Were Silent*

Venue:

Earl Lu Gallery

Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore

LASALLE College of the Arts, 1 McNally Street

The exhibition is on through 10 October 2018.

2. A Panel Discussion on the Nuclear Threat between Sim Chi Yin and Itty Abraham

Date/Time: 27 July, 7-930pm

LASALLE College of the Arts, Lecture hall F202

Admission is free.

Sim Chi Yin and Associate Professor Itty Abraham, Head of the Department of Southeast Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore, will discuss nuclear issues.

During my phone interview with Prof Itty, he explained that the nuclear threat is not limited to nuclear weapons. According to him, even though Singapore may not be directly threatened by nuclear weapons, if our neighbours decide to build nuclear power plants, the threat of a nuclear fallout will become real.

If a nuclear disaster of the same magnitude as the bombing of Hiroshima occurs in East Asia, though our immediate neighbourhood will not be directly affected by war, the environmental damage of nuclear weapons, and the global political fallout, will certainly have deep and lasting impacts on Singapore.

Prof Itty also wonders about the global significance of a denuclearised North Korea, given that most nuclear weapons in the world are in the hands of the Americans and Russians. While the media in the US likes to portray North Korea and its leader as lunatics, how much of this is true?

Image captions:

Sim Chi Yin: Singaporeans lead sheltered lives. We prefer to be indifferent bystanders instead of getting our hands dirty. (Photography by Long Guoxiong)

The anti-missile radar base in North Dakota, US, that entered service in 1975 but was shut down after only one day. Photography by Sim Chi Yin.

Photos of North Korea from China, reflecting on what goes on below the surface. (Photography by Long Guoxiong)