



# A comparative study of Chinese and Western landscape photography from a cross-cultural perspective: Taking "Yangtze, The Long River", "North Flow" and "Sleeping by the Mississippi" as examples

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**Abstract.** Landscape photography has become a very important part of contemporary world photography because of its ability to express and reflect on social issues. This article takes the works "Yangtze, The Long River", "North Flow" and "Sleeping by the Mississippi" by three photographers Nadav Kander, Zhang Kechun and Alec Soth as the research basis, analyzes the three works from the perspective of cultural dimension theory, and explores the possible development direction of landscape photography in China in the future.

**Keywords:** Landscape photography; Photographic art; Cross-cultural communication; Comparative study

## 1 Introduction

In the era of cultural integration brought about by the rapid development of the information society, many fields in the literary and artistic circles have begun to turn to a cross-cultural perspective. The creation and expression of many literary and artistic works have also begun to be influenced by various cultures. As a form of artistic creation with high technical attributes, photography has been particularly affected. After photography was introduced into China as a technical means, it has never been separated from the integration with Chinese traditional culture. From the collection photography of Mr. Lang Jingshan and others combined with the charm of Chinese painting to the landscape photography from the perspective of contemporary China represented by Zhang Kechun and others, domestic photography artists have been exploring new development paths for Chinese photography. In this article, the author compares and studies the landscape photography or works containing landscape photography with rivers as the creative clues of three photography artists, so as to try to explore some possible development ideas of landscape photography in China in the future or the influence and significance it can bring.

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S. Kaki et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2024 6th International Conference on Literature, Art and Human Development (ICLAHD 2024)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 885,

[https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-319-1\\_45](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-319-1_45)

## **2 Analysis of Selected Photographic Works**

### **2.1 Nadav Kander "Yangtze, The Long River"**

"Yangtze, The Long River" is a work shot by British photographer Nadav Kander in China between 2006 and 2007. This work takes the social landscape on both sides of the Yangtze River as the subject, supplemented by a small amount of natural landscape, thus recording the scene of China in rapid development. Kander's work takes the Yangtze River as the main line, tracing back from the estuary to the source of the Yangtze River.

The first chapter of the work, *The Mouth: The beginning and the End*, is such a poetic expression, which is both the beginning of the work and the end of the Yangtze River. And as expected, this chapter shoots the social scene of the estuary and nearby. This chapter not only has the wide river and sea surface, but also the traces of rapid development, and the large-scale construction behind the prosperity. The second chapter, *The Upstream: Lost Scenery*, shoots some surreal pictures of the upper reaches of the Yangtze River, thereby expressing the author's dreamlike feelings about China's rapid development. In the title of the next chapter, *The Flooding: The State is Shattered, Mountains and Rivers Remain*-Du Fu, Kander quoted a line from a poem by the Chinese poet Du Fu: "The country is destroyed, but the mountains and rivers remain". In this poem, Du Fu wanted to express that the change of dynasties is man-made, while the mountains and rivers will always stand tall, which is the fate of nature that humans cannot control. In this chapter, the author also used many photos to capture the spectacular mountains and rivers on both sides of the Yangtze River, thereby expressing his admiration for nature. In my understanding, Du Fu's original intention was also used by the author to warn that while developing rapidly, we must also consider many aspects, pay attention to environmental protection, and live in harmony with nature, in order to show the insignificance of human beings. The last chapter, *The Upper Reaches: Between Heaven and Earth*, mainly photographed the end point of tracing back to the source, where the unique natural and social landscapes also drew a perfect end to this work. In short, "Yangtze, The Long River" is an outstanding work by Nadav Kander. It not only shows the magnificent natural and social landscape of the Yangtze River, but also metaphorically uses the natural element of the Yangtze River to illustrate the rapid development and changes of Chinese society.

### **2.2 Zhang Kechun "North Flow"**

"North Flow" is a landscape photography work by Chinese photographer Zhang Kechun, which he took during his many trips to the Yellow River Basin between 2010 and 2013. The title of the work comes from the "The River Flows North" in the Book of Songs. At the same time, the author was inspired by Zhang Chengzhi's novel "The River in the North", and thus embarked on this creative journey with the Yellow River, China's mother river, as the clue.

In this work, the author mainly photographs the natural and social landscapes around the Yellow River Basin, and people as elements are extremely small in the author's lens. "Such images do not have the humanistic care of traditional documentaries, nor do they abandon objective and faithful recording, but they infinitely magnify the proportion of people and the environment and deliberately distance them." [1] The unique "bland" color tone of the Northwest land, the smallness of the characters, and the even absurd scenes in the development process together constitute this set of landscape photography works full of surreal colors. In Zhang Kechun's works, we can see people pumping water from puddles in the desert, Buddha heads that have not yet been completed on large construction sites, and the rockery under construction in the author's lens is so out of tune with reality. Man-made and natural are colliding fiercely on the banks of the Yellow River, and the author has recorded the climax of these collisions. The ancient Yellow River is a witness to China's development and witnesses the wheel of time rolling over the wilderness of the past. Zhang Kechun also photographed these fleeting realities with a calm perspective. The extremely restrained emotions shown by the author in his works are also an important manifestation of contemporary Chinese landscape photography.

### 2.3 Alec Soth "Sleeping by the Mississippi"

"Sleeping by the Mississippi" is a work created by American photographer Alec Soth while traveling along the Mississippi River. Through a series of large-format color photographs, the book presents an eclectic mix of personal, landscape, and interior worlds along the Mississippi River. These photographs not only delicately capture the daily life of the small town, but also convey a constant mood of loneliness, longing, and reverie through unique perspectives and compositions. As the mother river of the United States, the Mississippi River carries a very rich historical and cultural connotation and value. In the process of creation, Soth not only photographed the natural landscape of the Mississippi River and the social landscape along the river, but also focused his lens on the life of marginalized people living around the river, such as homeless people, criminals, sex workers, etc. The retention of personal perspective and emotions makes this group of works bring viewers a very unique viewing experience.

Soth uses Mississippi as the bright line in the whole work, and a delicate sense of loneliness as the dark line throughout the work. We can see a lonely small house in the field, a single bed in a cramped hut, a boat slightly stranded by the river, and even two almost repeated photos: a lonely single sofa in the corner of the house. The record of the lives of people on the edge of the river also presents us with a Mississippi intertwined with countless emotions such as loneliness, hope, and regret from a unique perspective and gentle and restrained emotional expression. This can also arouse society's attention and thinking about them, and it also seems to urge us to think about the relationship between ourselves and society, and how to pay attention to those neglected and forgotten people.

### 3 Similarities and Differences between Chinese and Foreign Cultural Perspectives in Landscape Photography

The cultural dimension theory is a five-dimensional measure of cross-cultural values summarized by Geert Hofstede in his 1980 masterpiece "The Influence of Culture: A Cross-National Comparison of Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations" and supplemented by scholars such as Peng Meike. These five dimensions are: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, and long-term orientation/short-term orientation. I believe that the cultural differences shown by the three photographers in their works can be mainly interpreted from the dimension of individualism/collectivism.

First, scholar Li Wenjuan pointed out in her article "Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions and Cross-Cultural Research" that the individualism/collectivism dimension is a measure of whether a society as a whole focuses on individual interests or collective interests. In a society with individualistic tendencies, the relationship between people is loose. People tend to care about themselves and their small families; while a society with collectivist tendencies focuses on relationships within the ethnic group and cares about the extended family. Strong ethnic group relationships can provide people with continuous protection. Individuals must be absolutely loyal to the ethnic group [2].

Many of Nadav Kander's works "Yangtze, The Long River" have orderly elements in their pictures, such as a photo in the first chapter showing a row of almost identical trucks neatly arranged. This represents that in Kander's perspective as an outsider, China has fostered a culture with a high degree of collectivism. However, Kander then showed some abnormal phenomena in his works, such as a woman living and cooking on the ruins of a demolished house. Obviously, this should be avoided in Chinese society, but the fact that it does exist in reality also proves that reality is not as perfect as the ideal. This is also what Kander wants to show in his works, the possible problems behind rapid development. Although Kander's works also have collectivist elements, once the characters in the pictures that may point out the problem are almost always single or double individuals, which also implies that Kander seems to always think about how to face problems and difficulties from a personal perspective. In Zhang Kechun's work "North Flow", which focuses on similar issues, people often appear in a collective form. For example, in one of his works, a group of people are standing on the rocky beach in the river, preparing to swim, and in the distance is the city cluster on the other side of the river. This also expresses Zhang Kechun's idea that people are always insignificant in the face of nature, whether they exist as individuals or as a group. Alec Soth once said, "There is a problem with photography, that is, it is entirely an art of representation, so the shooting must be full of the photographer's self-projection of others." [3] In "Sleeping by the Mississippi", Soth's lens is more focused on the marginalized people living on the banks of the Mississippi River. He incorporates the emotions of these people into his own work, and these emotions also run through the entire work, so we can almost attribute Soth's perspective to a large extent individualism.

## 4 Dilemma and Reflections Facing Chinese Landscape Photography

In his article “Landscape Photography and Its Cultural Dilemma”, scholar Zheng Jialun pointed out that the biggest problem facing Chinese landscape photography is the rigidity and homogenization of style and content. “Its relatively simple picture form is very eye-catching, and it does not require too much manipulation to achieve a seemingly good picture effect. Therefore, creators rush to seize the subject matter, and then use a programmed creation method to obtain a basically fixed picture form to present the subject matter in a homogenized manner.” [4] At present, many Chinese landscape photography practitioners are trapped in a vicious circle of pursuing “obvious landscape photography characteristics” such as large scene, small figures, low saturation, etc. The author believes that this is caused by excessive worship and imitation of some excellent landscape photography works. Society is defined as “huge landscape stacking” in “Spectacle Society”. [5] From this perspective, landscape photography will not be defined so narrowly, and there will be more possibilities.

Breaking away from the framework of form, Chinese landscape photography does not have to be completely confined to the narrative method of large scene and small figures in terms of content, and “expressionless photography” as a recognized symbol of landscape photography can also be more transformed into a form. If we start from an individualistic perspective and incorporate more of the creator’s personal thinking into the expression of the work, we may be able to better connect and interact with the viewer, which is also an interesting attempt to convey the content of landscape photography. In the article “Alternative methods in contemporary South African landscape photography”, the author interprets the works of three South African photographers in detail. These photographers use various creative methods that seem to have nothing to do with landscape, which is also a direction that can be tried. [6]

In the current era of rapid technological development, there are many works that rely too much on technical expression and ignore the importance of concepts and core. Landscape photography is not simply a reproduction of social landscapes with precise and high-quality technology, but the communication of personal views extended from a profound sense of problem. In the current era of cultural integration and globalization, looking for views on the impact of cultural differences between China and foreign countries on society is also a new way of thinking in landscape photography creation.

## 5 Conclusion

Western landscape photography and Chinese landscape photography have many differences in perspective due to many differences in values, but these differences are worth exploring for artistic creation. The three Chinese and foreign artists have also made different interpretations of landscape photography works with rivers as clues. After understanding different creative concepts, works that are not bound by existing forms and that focus on content for a long time and are meticulous are more likely to

shine on the photography stage. In the process of social development, the emergence of problems is inevitable. How to select and verify valuable issues is also one of the directions that photographers should pay attention to. This is also the reason why landscape photography is a very important part of photographic art worldwide. At present, Chinese landscape photography faces difficulties such as single style, technology dependence, and lack of cultural connotation. However, through the pursuit of focusing on the expression of emotions and thoughts, integrating various art forms, paying attention to social reality, and drawing on international experience, we can promote the development and innovation of landscape photography and create more works with artistic appeal and ideological depth.

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