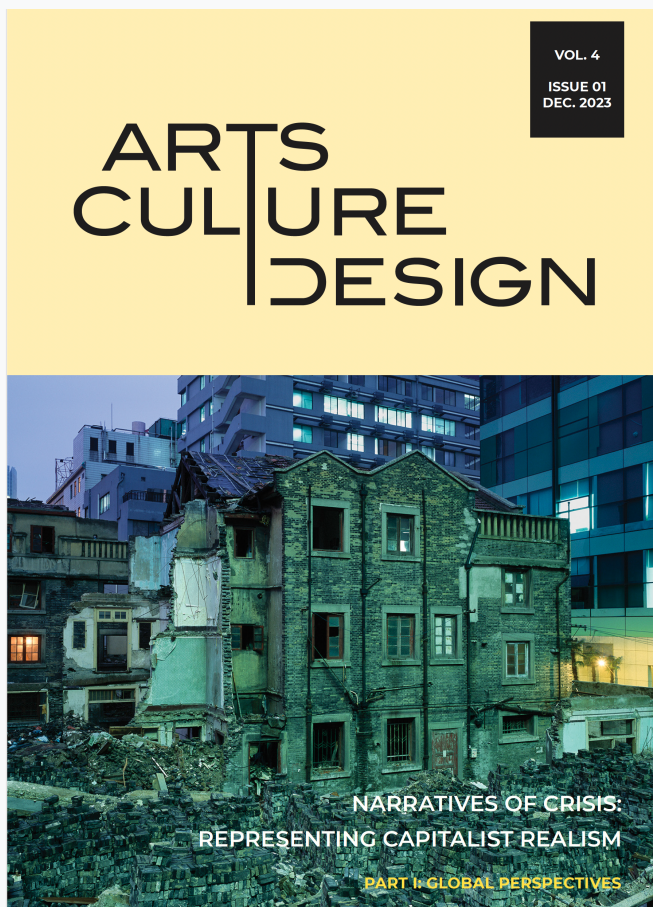


## Design/Arts/Culture

Vol 4, No 1 (2023)

Narratives of Crisis: Representing Capitalist Realism



### Examining global phenomena of poverty and inequality through The Poverty Line project

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doi: [10.12681/dac.35327](https://doi.org/10.12681/dac.35327)

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#### To cite this article:

Lin, H. (2023). Examining global phenomena of poverty and inequality through The Poverty Line project. *Design/Arts/Culture*, 4(1), 72–83. <https://doi.org/10.12681/dac.35327>

# EXAMINING GLOBAL PHENOMENA OF POVERTY AND INEQUALITY THROUGH *THE POVERTY LINE* PROJECT

Stefen Chow and Huiyi Lin  
[Chow and Lin]

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**Keywords:**

Art  
Photography  
Poverty  
Inequality  
Poverty Line  
food choices  
food systems  
Globalization

## ABSTRACT

The Poverty Line project started from a question: “What does it mean to be poor?”

In 2010, we began creating art examining the global phenomena of poverty and inequality. From our observations, and our respective backgrounds of economics (Lin) and photography (Chow), we discussed the complexities of the issues in different places we lived in or visited. Our ideas were distilled into representing the daily food choices one would face living at the poverty line of a country. From 2010 to 2020, we traveled 200,000 kilometers to create case studies of 36 countries and territories spanning six continents. We used each country’s official poverty definition to derive a per-person, per-day rate. For middle- and high-income economies, the average low-income household food expenditure is taken into account, while for low-income economies, the entire daily income of a poor individual is used. According to the granted sum of money, food is bought in local marketplaces. Each product is photographed on a local newspaper from the day of the shoot. Through the research, we realized and broke down assumptions about poverty and inequality, and gathered ideas about food systems and vulnerabilities.



**CHOW AND LIN** The crux of Chow and Lin’s practice lies in their methodology of statistical, mathematical, and computational techniques to address global issues since 2010. Chow and Lin’s projects are driven by the discursive backgrounds in economics, public policy, media, and these are further augmented by enduring exchanges with specialists from those fields. Their projects have been exhibited at Arles Les Rencontres De La Photographie, Art Museum of Guangzhou Academy of Fine Art, Venice Arte Laguna, Houston FotoFest Biennial, National University of Singapore Museum and were invited to present at the United Nations Conference Centre in Bangkok. Their works are in the permanent collections of The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and China Central Academy of Fine Arts Museum. They are authors of *The Poverty Line* (published by Actes Sud and Lars Muller, 2021). Stefen Chow and Huiyi Lin (b. Malaysia / Singapore) currently reside in Beijing, China.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The *Poverty Line* project started from a question: “What does it mean to be poor?” In 2010, we began creating art examining the global phenomena of poverty and inequality. From our observations, and our respective backgrounds of economics (Lin) and photography (Chow), we discussed the complexities of the issues in different places we lived in or visited. Our ideas were distilled into representing the daily food choices one would face living at the poverty line of a country.

At the start of topic exploration, we realized countries have different ways of defining poverty, depending on their political inclinations, social expectations and economic resources. While the World Bank set a widely known international poverty definition (USD 2.15 per person per day using 2017 prices, as of September 2022), this focused on extreme poverty. Broadly countries may use two types of income poverty measurement approaches – absolute poverty and relative poverty. Absolute poverty, which is used by most low-income economies, usually starts from calculating the costs of a local diet which fulfils calorific and other basic needs for a grown person in a day. On the other hand,



Figure 1: China, Beijing, December 2010, CNY 3.28 (EUR 0.37)



Figure 2: France, Paris, September 2015, (EUR 5.99)



Figure 3: India, Delhi, December 2011, INR 32 (EUR 0.46)



Figure 4: Japan, Tokyo, February 2011, JPY 394 (EUR 3.51)



Figure 5: China, Hong Kong, July 2011, HKD 44.96 (EUR 4.01)

relative poverty draws up a relative standard of living. For example, the European Union sets the at-risk of poverty threshold at 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers. It is also noted that the World Bank and United Nations Development Programme additionally look at non-monetary deprivations such as access to education and basic infrastructure, to construct a multidimensional poverty measure. Upon setting the definition of poverty, governments formulate poverty alleviation measures for people living below (and for certain cases, also at) the poverty line. We decided to use each country's official

poverty definition to derive a per-person, per-day rate. For middle- and high-income economies, the average low-income household food expenditure is taken into account, while for low-income economies, the entire daily income of a poor individual is used. According to the granted sum of money, food is bought in local marketplaces. We purchase 50 to 100 items for each country, covering every food group: vegetables, fruits, carbohydrates, protein and snacks. Each product is photographed on a local newspaper from the day of the shoot. The news headlines, graphics and advertisements form an envelope of time and space. Dimensions

and lighting are carefully determined, in order to express identical aesthetics over time and geographical breakdown. This typological method enables a singular interpretation of the picture, while relating details of each one to the rest of the corpus.

Over a period of over 10 years (2010-2020), we traveled 200,000 kilometers to create case studies of 36 countries and territories spanning six continents. Through the research, creation and engagement, we expanded our understanding and questions around the issues.

**2. WHO IS POOR?**

A key learning point we found is that poverty is not always visible. Poverty is often confused with homelessness, destitution or rural impoverishment, with stereotyped imagery associations. While those groups are part of the poor population, poor people are not necessarily uneducated or jobless especially in developed economies.

We covered Japan in 2011, and found poverty to be a sensitive, at times taboo, topic. Japan

coordinated local social service organizations. We took the latter as a proxy indicator to understand Hong Kong's poverty situation. Ground reality hit when Chow spoke with a childhood friend. Then in his 30's, he had a college degree, was single and worked two service jobs since being retrenched from a full-time position a few years ago. His daily food budget was similar to what we were



Figure 7: United States of America, New York, October 2011, USD 4.91 (EUR 3.60)



Figure 6: Greece, Thessaloniki, September 2018, (EUR 4.02)



Figure 8: Brazil, Rio de Janeiro, May 2012, BRL 2.33, (EUR 0.93)

publicly released its national poverty rate for the first time in 2009. The level of 15.7% (2006) was considered high amongst developed countries, and countered local assumption of a uniformly middle class population. Most of the poor were “working poor” having low-wage jobs with little or no social security, and the rate of poverty was especially high for single-parent households.

Hong Kong established an official poverty line in 2013. When we undertook the project there in 2011, we had observed the government’s multi-dimensional approach and social welfare measures, as well as the poverty threshold monitored by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS) which



Figure 9: Germany, Hamburg, November 2011, (EUR 4.82)

photographing and the struggles were real against an appearance of normalcy. The subject closeness struck us.

When we exhibited in Greece at the Thessaloniki PhotoBiennale in 2018, we took the opportunity to do the project there. Still in a protracted debt crisis that started in 2009, Greece had 20.2% monetary poverty rate and 21.5% unemployment in 2017. Notably, youth unemployment was 43.6%, the highest in the euro area. As we interacted with arts and culture contacts, we found that many in institutional positions (including a museum vice director) were not on full-time status and did not qualify for employment benefits. Job and income security seemed rare

There are poverty situations involving structural unemployment, job instability, high dependency and other factors. The state of poverty is a range which starts at the poverty line and extends all the way down. Such non-apparentness complicates policy measures and societal perception.

### 3. WHAT SHOULD THE POOR EAT?

A common question we encounter, is why the inclusion of chocolates and sweets which seem to be indulgences rather than bare necessities. We have also received audience comments, that the vegetables portrayed are clean and whole, better looking than what a poor person would be able to afford. This seems to imply an assumption of what poor people should eat or buy.

Choice is the core of the project concept. When we looked into spending behavior of people in poverty, we were particularly influenced by the research by economists Sir Angus Deaton, and Abhijeet V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo – who were incidentally all Nobel Prize for Economics awardees at different times. In Banerjee-Duflo's paper "The Economic Lives of the Poor" which was later developed into the book "Poor Economics", they laid out field research that show the poor have a sense of choice and may not choose to spend more on basic calories if there is more money to spend; they may seek out better tasting, more expensive calories or non-food items. We consider the psyche of constrained choices in a system which competes on options, and the rationality and irrationality of human behavior.

Time is an implicit factor that affects food choices. In most developed economies,

convenience foods such as ready-to-heat meals and packaged snacks become a solution for households which cannot afford the time to cook due to irregular work schedules and multiple commitments.

Much of these are ultra-processed foods, which use ingredients such as processed sugars, modified oils, protein sources and additives to improve the attractiveness and shelf-life of food products. Ultra-processed foods account for more than half of the energy intake in US and UK populations, and are disproportionately consumed by lower-income individuals. These foods often have high fat, sugar and salt levels, and have been shown to be associated with obesity, poorer



Figure 10: Nepal, Kathmandu, March 2011, NPR 32.88 (EUR 0.32)



Figure 11: Spain, Getxo, October 2018, (EUR 4.74)

diet quality and other serious health problems. At the daily amount, access is a qualifier which may not be taken for granted. We purchase the food items in locally accessible retail channels which include markets, grocery and food shops, and supermarkets. In Brazil's Rio de Janeiro in 2012, the grocery shops in the



Figure 12: South Africa, Cape Town, October 2019, ZAR 27 (EUR 1.75)

favelas charged higher per unit prices than the hypermarkets, but the bus ticket to get to the hypermarket cost a day’s income at the poverty line. Common commercial practice of offering cheaper prices for bulk purchases involve a minimum ability to spend. At an open-air market in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 2019, we were unable to purchase chicken meat at the per-person per-day poverty line amount, as sellers only sold whole chickens which were freshly slaughtered. On the other hand, in European supermarkets, chicken parts (breast, drumsticks, wings etc.) are sold in chilled and frozen packs. Infrastructure dictates the set of feasible options.

#### 4. FOOD SYSTEMS AND VULNERABILITIES

As we travelled, ate and photographed across different countries during the creation process, we appreciated the variety of food palates which are keen marks of local culture. Just as we experienced diversity of food, we also found parallels of base ingredients across countries and continents. In most countries, meat comes largely from chicken, pork, beef and fish. Wheat, rice and corn and their related products account for over 40% of calories consumed globally. They form the basis of many countries’ staples which may take on different forms and flavors. Such links point to amazing journeys taken by foods and the people who took them along.

Looking into the supply chains behind globally consumed agricultural products, we realized

a landscape of hubs which specialize in different crops and animals. Industrialization of agriculture and supply chains to achieve efficiencies led to selection and consolidation of production, processing and distribution resources. When a major node in this ecosystem is disrupted such as during the Ukraine war, the impact is felt in far-reaching places. In the current and longer term, climate change will impact the production and distribution of food with higher temperatures and extreme weather events affecting crop yields, and pest and weed occurrence. Food security has become increasingly important for countries to diversify and protect key food and factor supplies. At the individual level, low-income consumers, who spend a larger part of their expenditure on food than higher income earners, are most vulnerable to food inflation prices.

We also observed the production structure of global modern processed food products. While we did not purchase Coca-Cola for the project (we left out beverages as they could not be photographed unpackaged), it was available in all the locations we were in. We discovered instant noodles and Oreo cookies as food inventions in the past century which transversed their countries of origin to be eaten internationally. Akin to Coca-Cola, their production systems have been reassembled to allow local or regional manufacturing. For instant noodles, the multitude of local flavors they may come in never fails to surprise.



Figure 13a: United States of America, New York, October 2011, USD 4.91 (EUR 3.60)

Figure 13b: Greece, Thessaloniki, September 2018, (EUR 4.02)

Figure 13c: Brunei, Bandar Seri Begawan, May 2015, BND 0.93 (EUR 0.62)

Figure 13d: Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, October 2019, ETB 19.7 (EUR 0.60) (EUR 0.62)



Figure 14a: Myanmar, Yangon, August 2016, MMK 1,030 (EUR 0.80)



Figure 14b: Turkey, Istanbul, October 2019, TRY 6.99 (EUR 1.11)



Figure 14c: Norway, Oslo, October 2014, NOK 65 (EUR 7.95)



Figure 14c: United Arab Emirates, Dubai, September 2014, AED 11.08 (EUR 2.30)

## CONCLUSION

“Poverty is the parent of revolution and crime” – Aristotle wrote in a seminal book on politics. Poverty and inequality have existed in societies for millennia. The weakening of the Roman Republic in the 100s B.C. was attributed in part to high economic inequality, with small citizen owners’ land being bought out by the wealthy during prolonged distant war efforts. Reform attempts under a representative system were undermined by political violence and civil war later broke out.

In the current context of information access, high levels of poverty and inequality are even more powerful destabilizing forces for societies and economies. Inequality often exists both in income and political status, which may mutually reinforce and perpetuate larger divides. Inequality itself may not be the single factor for social revolution, but it weakens the social compact.

Over the past thirty years, income inequality has increased for most countries around the world. The sense of unequal share of growth and lack of opportunity in the face of globalization has led to the rise of right wing politics and social unrest such as Occupy Wall Street, Arab Spring and Yellow Vest. And while extreme poverty rates fell in most regions pre-pandemic, they remain high especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

Poverty and inequality are not isolated problems, they can potentially become triggers in connected global systems. Poverty, inequality and their underlying causes need to be addressed whether for intrinsic and instrumental reasons. The pandemic has highlighted the unequal access to medical resources, social safety nets, and infrastructure to work and learn. Climate change and technological progress will further pressure income and social divides if the structural issues are not addressed. The solutions for alleviating poverty and inequality will need to change accordingly, and understanding the context is crucial.

Back to our starting question, “What does it mean to be poor?” We did not set out to make a statement, let alone create work that could be considered contemporary art. Diving into this project gave us deeper insight into how the world works in its imperfect ways. Humanity has undoubtedly reached a more advanced stage of civilization than one could imagine. *The Poverty Line* project is a reminder that there is still more to be done. It is a record of our time, an open valve for social perception.



Figure 15: Installation view of *The Poverty Line* at "Capitalist Realism: Future Perfect," Thessaloniki PhotoBiennale 2018, Thessaloniki Museum of Photography, Greece



Figure 16: Installation view of *The Poverty Line* at "Summer of Fireflies: The Poverty Line Solo Exhibition," Arles Les Rencontres De La Photographie 2021, Arles, France. Credit: Gilles Massot



**Figure 17:** Artist presentation at side-event “Closing the Gaps – Social Protection and Poverty in Asia and the Pacific” during Fifth Session of the Committee on Social Development, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, United Nations Conference Centre Bangkok, 2018, Thailand.

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