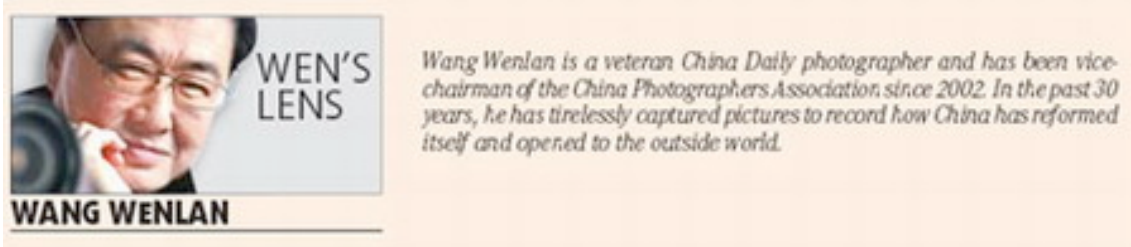


"Every picture should be unique." A Conversation with Wang Wenlan

Holger Briel



(© *China Daily*)

Wang Wenlan does not really need an introduction. One of China's most respected photographers for over 30 years, he has worked as a photojournalist for *China Daily* since it commenced publication and where he is Assistant Editor-in-chief and Senior Photographer. He has been the Deputy President of the China Photographer's Association since 2002, an Editorial Member of *Photo China*, *People's Photography* and the *Philharmonic Magazine*, and a Consultant for *Chinese National Geography*.

Among others, his awards include the National Top 10 Photographers Award (1986), the 1991 National Top 10 of Portraiture Photographers Award, the National Good News Awards and the Golden Award of National Photography (both in 1987), the 1995 Academy Contribution Award for Chinese Photography and the China Journalism Award in 2002, 2003 and 2004. He has sat on juries too numerous to mention and has published and edited over 15 books and exhibited in many national and international exhibitions, including "Strolling on the Square in National Art Museum of China (1985), "Portrait" in the National Art Museum of China (1996); "The Kingdom of Bicycles" in the Pingyao International Photography Festival (2005); the Philharmonic in Gulangyu International Piano Art Festival (2008) and the 2015 Exhibition of his bicycle images in Los Angeles.

His subjects are his homeland, its people and its rapid metamorphosis over the last decades. While he has taken photographs of all the main politicians of the last decades and official pictures at the Beijing Olympics, his true calling is the photographic representation of ordinary people and their daily life struggles in a changing land. His love of the bicycle is no coincidence. Like no other means of transport, it captures the essence of China and the bicycle's changing role from main transport of the masses to an auxiliary means only speaks to the monumental changes taking place in China even today. One of his latest projects, if one could really call it that, is the project, "China - 30 Years of Reform", presented on *China Daily's* website, in which he masterly juxtaposes images of today with those of 30 years ago having the same topic and adds commentary to them. His work goes far beyond normal photography and with his lifelong dedication to fearlessly capture the changing fortunes of China, he has become one of the foremost chroniclers of Chinese culture (see samples below).

I caught up with him in the Summer of 2015 during a week-long *China Daily* trip for foreign correspondents and press photographers to Shanxi. The interview was begun during one of the bus journeys and was then verified in writing after the end of the trip.

1. Wang Wenlan, you have been with China Daily for many years. In particular, I was very impressed with your project, ‘China 30 Years of Reform’ How did this project come about? How did you choose your photographs and why?

Wang: I used to take pictures with borrowed cameras because we only had film cameras at that time and film was very expensive. So, most of the pictures I took were about myself. I didn't start learning photography until I came to China Daily. The year 1976 was a turning point for me. In the years between 1966 and 1976, I thought people from other parts of the world lived similar lives to us. But after three State leaders passed away in 1976, we suddenly realized that wasn't true. We began to learn about new things after the reform and opening-up policy in 1978. The year 2000 seemed too far away at that time but now it's 2015. Therefore, an idea came to my mind. I wanted to take a series of photographs showing 30 years of reform. I work for *China Daily* and as a result, I have access to witness changes in the daily lives of both the most senior authorities and the ordinary people. I believe photographs are not only about light, shadow or beautiful things. They are more a record of history.

2. How do you see the relationship between photographs and captions or text?

Wang: In my opinion, photographs should firstly be expressive and trigger thoughts. We need to capture the image, words and the moment. As for captions, we need to cover the five Ws [Who, What, When, Where and Why]. The real talents of an excellent photographer are how to let the photograph speak for itself and how to help it speak better. Photographs lose their expressiveness if too much attention is paid to captions or text. The best photographs are those that can't be replaced by captions.

3. Would you agree that we now interact more with our environment via visual media? Do you think this is a good development?

Wang: There are so many languages and characters in the world. But one common language is “vision” — be it rolling vision, video; or still vision, pictures. It can be communicated across cultures. It is more convenient and straightforward, so I think visual media development is a good thing.

4. How would you define your ethics of photography?

Wang: I capture the moment in one click. I don't process the picture too much afterwards. This is my bottom line.

5. What is your philosophy in taking photographs? What makes a photograph an exceptional one?

Wang: Every picture should be unique. However, it is very difficult to do this. A photographer may spend his entire life trying to capture a unique work. Such photographers and works are very rare but we have to strive for that against all odds. We first should not copycat or imitate, but look for differences. I like things that pass away immediately, or things that are changing. Something that is not yet born, or undergoing changes, such as a child. I also like something about to vanish. In a nutshell, the moment of change.

6. Would you share one or two stories about creating some of your famous images?

Wang: It's very difficult to take really good pictures, such as ones like the Kingdom of Bicycles that I took. There were very few automobiles in China at that time and bicycles were like floods

in the streets. One day, I was riding along Chang'an Avenue and I thought I need to shoot pictures of more bikes. It was in 1991 in Shanghai, when I shot the Kingdom of Bicycles.

I saw a similar news picture then, and I asked locals where the photographer shot that picture. A Shanghainese told me it was taken at a railway crossing. I therefore chose to shoot from the angle of an overpass. I decided to shoot at morning rush hour. The crossing let bikes go when there were no trains. I took the moment of traffic. It's true that there were minivans and buses in the traffic and the structure of the picture is not the best balanced. But that moment when I clicked was the most balanced. We won't see such a scenario in a city again. Multilevel traffic and viaducts have completely taken the place of bikes. The moment is gone.

7. In the light of recent advances in digital photography and the Internet, how do you see the future of press photography? Would you recommend the profession of press photographer to young adults?

Wang: With the development of the Internet, digital cameras and mobile phones, I think anyone with a mobile phone can be a news platform or be called an amateur news photographer. Photographers online have walked out of the dark film room to "daylight". You can stimulate any kind of light with the help of a computer, and this change of technology has freed photographers and the results can reach viewers quickly. Meanwhile, this has pushed news photographers into a corner, because if you don't have very special images, the amateurs will replace you.

Future young news photographers need to study more. They should be scholars who care about politics, economics, social issues — who like sciences and the arts. Only then can you be expressive when you shoot pictures. This will help your picture gain depth. Ordinary people would say, "I have something", yet a news photographer can say, "So do I, and mine is better", this is what differentiates you from others. Such versatile skills of professionalism are what future news photographers should demonstrate.

8. From your experience, are there more images taken in Asian countries than in the West? If this is true, how would you explain this phenomenon?

Wang: I've been to the five continents in the 40 years of my career. But the aim of the trips was not shooting pictures overseas but broadening my eyesight, learning other ways of thinking, and storing that for the presentation of the lives of the Chinese. If you habitually take pictures of one country, you'll get lost. I need to jump out to look like a bystander. Only then can we not miss the great moments.

9. What do you think of selfies?

Wang: I take selfies too, sometimes. I think selfies are a kind of positive narcissism. I took selfies when I was young and I want to capture some moments with myself as the topic.

10. Do you use post-production tools? If so, what and why? If not, why not?

Wang: If I think the exposure metering is allowed, I am not using post-production tools. I crop pictures but only very rarely. I normally retain the photographs as they were shot originally.

Examples from 30 Years of Change:

Fighting the Cabbage Wars



Affordable Leisure



(all images © Wang Wenlan)

Admittedly, there is still much poverty in China. But in general its people do have more money and can enjoy more leisure.

By one index, namely the money spent on food in a family's total expenditure, China has seen a major difference in the last three decades. Called by economists the Engle coefficient, it has come down in urban China from 57.5 to 35.8 in percentage terms, and in rural China, from 67.7 to 43.

Nowadays each urban resident would use around 14 percent of his or her total spending to chase cultural, entertainment, and sports interests, as reflected by data released by the National Statistics Bureau.

In real terms, it is 1,200 Yuan (\$163.54) on average. But in Beijing and Shanghai, it means every person would spend, not including the purchase of gadgets, 2,500 Yuan a year. That, in Mao's time, could be equivalent to a young worker's 10 years' wages.

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1996 "Perspective on Celebrity", China Daily Press

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2001 "The Flashing Moment" ,Peking University Press

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2004 "Days on Bicycles",China Federation of Literary and Art Circles Publishing Corporation (CFLACP)

2006 "Vibrant Asia", China Book Co.

2007 "Horizon", China Renmin University Press

2007 "Coincidence", China Renmin University Press

2003 Edited "Focus of 100 Photographers on SARS", CFLACP

2008 Edited "Focus of 100 Photographers on Snow Line", CFLACP

- 2008 Edited "Focus of 100 Photographers on Earthquake" ,CFLACP
- 2008 Edited "Focus of 100 Photographers on China", CFLACP
- 2008 Edited "Focus of 100 Photographers on the Olympics", CFLACP
- 2009 "Trifles of Family and Nation", Nanfang Daily Press

Exhibitions (sample)

- 1985 Strolling on the Square in National Art Museum of China
- 1996 Portrait in National Art Museum of China
- 2005 The Kingdom of Bicycles in Pingyao International Photography Festival
- 2008 Philharmonic in Gulangyu International Piano Art Festival
- 2008 Life in Movement in Beijing Seasons Place