

chengdoo

CITYLIFE

063

MAR 2013

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CITY
MAP
inside



People

MIU

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MIU Club

Chengdu's premier lounge and dining facility

Featuring

Head chef from a Michelin-starred Spanish restaurant
China's premier jazz musician Ren Yuqing from Shanghai
Asia's No. 2 mixologist Jin Zhonglei from Shanghai
and a live band playing the world's most popular songs

15:00~Teatime, Folk\Lounge\Country

18:00~Dinner Time,

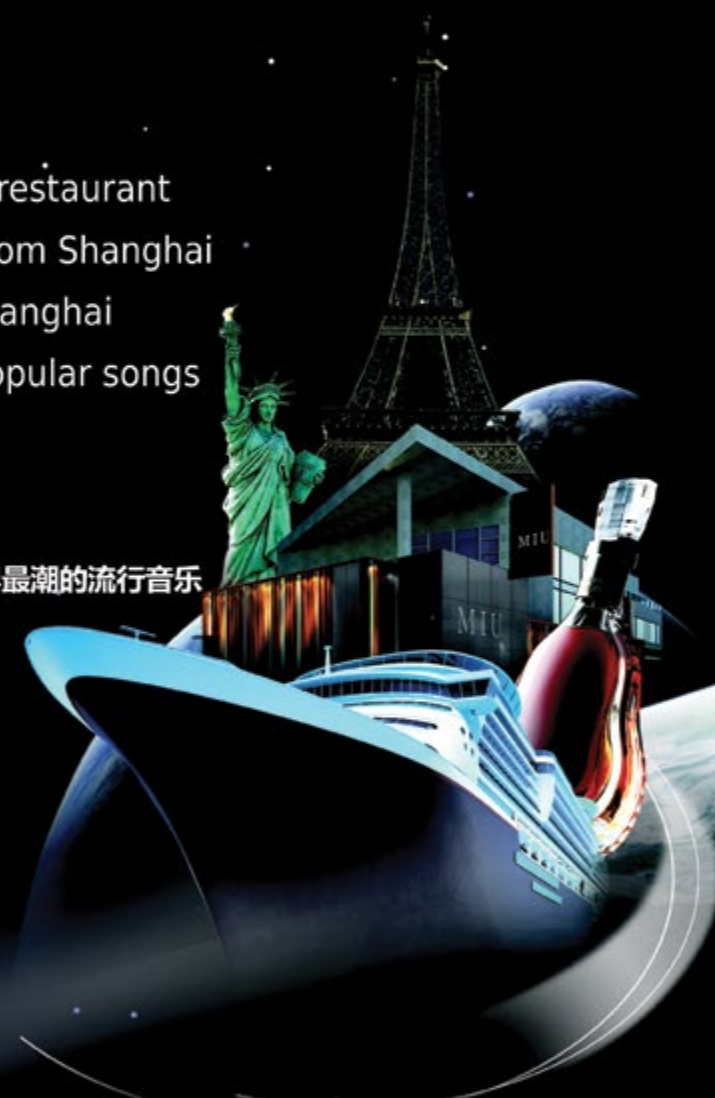
19:00~Happy hour, lounge\Jazz\Country

21:00~Club Time, 中国最好的Live Band\以及来自世界最潮的流行音乐

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People of Chengdu

photos by dan sandoval





Shooting Stars

big dreams from chengdu to the world

Shanghainese model Zhang Wen for H&M.

I first met **Kyle Fong** (Feng Jiaqi) in 2005, shortly after I'd arrived in Chengdu. There were a few local rock bands playing at the Shamrock, and being in my early 20s and fancying going out to a rock show as an opportunity to dress up, I was wearing my finest torn fishnet stockings and leather and lip ring, and he tapped me on the shoulder and complimented my clothes.

I would find out that he was an English major at the Chengdu University of Information Technology who happened to be really into music and clothes and on the weekends he would come over and try on my black eyeliner and we would take snapshots in the mirror, and then he would wash it all off before going to eat dinner with what he describes as his "very normal, average family."

In his senior year, he went to Beijing for an internship and said he didn't like the way people talked and that he missed Sichuan. So I was surprised when not long after he announced that he was moving to Shanghai. We

mostly fell out of contact over the years, but once he mentioned he was taking photos and did we want to publish any in the magazine? "This is CHENGDOO magazine," I replied. "What do we want with Shanghai party photos? Contact the Shanghai magazines." Another few years passed and I heard from him again. "I'm in Chengdu. Let's meet at the Europe House."

Not exactly my cup of tea, but it's conveniently located, so I went upstairs and took a seat on the rococo-inspired sofa chair while a white-gloved waitress poured me some hot water, and I ordered the most expensive coffee I've ever had in my life. Kyle arrived—he had ditched his plastic-framed glasses for a lip ring and he had a more worldly, confident air about him, but otherwise he looked more or less like the same kid I knew all those years ago.

He ordered green tea ("Too cool for coffee, Mr. Shanghai?" I asked. "No, it's my stomach. I had spicy food last night") before filling me in on how he's become a big-shot photographer.

So how did you get started in photography?

I got interested because I always liked rock 'n' roll—it had been always part of my life. In university every week, I'd go to see what new CDs from Western rock 'n' roll bands the sellers had, and also to Little Bar. At that time I couldn't afford an expensive camera, so I just used a digital [snapshot] camera.

Then in Shanghai, I contacted the expat magazine *City Weekend*. By then I had bought an SLR and was always going to take pictures of some underground rock shows. The third time I sent photos in, they were published, and every issue since then they send me to take photos of shows. I've been shooting for this magazine for almost 20 issues. I think that [gave me confidence] to try to work as a photographer. So then I went to the attached photography institute of Fudan University and studied for a year.

At that time I did a lot of events, parties, birthday parties, corporate events, expos, some food exhibitions. So that's how I made money for a few years, and after that I started shooting models because I wanted to be in the fashion industry as a photographer. I love fashion—it's connected with rock 'n' roll as well, and now it's been two years since I started to do fashion.

Now I do a lot of portraits for magazine editorials, maybe because that's what I'm good at and most of the magazines want that. I shot Guo Jingming, the writer, and the most famous Chinese football star and some CEOs

for *Harper's Bazaar* and *Numéro*. I've also done some work for *Elle Men*, and a couple weeks ago for *Men's Health* I shot a photo of a renowned blood-transfusion specialist in his surgery room. It was very exciting for me. I love portraits—they can show the expression or the moment of the person's sense.

How do you find work?

Weibo helps, and if the editor likes your work they might introduce you to others from the same industry. One time I shot the singer from Massive Attack performing, and I put it on Weibo, and the editor [of *Numéro*] found it and sent me a message asking if they could buy the picture from me. So then they called me another time and I worked with them to shoot a filmmaker from Paris who worked with [*Beijing Bicycle*] director Wang Xiaoshuai, and then *she* e-mailed me again a few months ago because she wanted to use another photo for a French film magazine.

Do you think being able to speak English well helps?

I didn't take this as an advantage, I'm just thinking this is my tool for use. Most of the time, for the editorials, you speak Chinese, but if it's a Westerner, if you take photos of them you have to speak English with them.

Your work has also taken you abroad now.

Yes, I shot the New York Fashion Week. Yahoo! China needed a photographer to cover the shows so I flew there with two writers. Shooting backstage was interesting—you can see a lot of very famous models, doing hair and makeup, and it's not like Shanghai's fashion week. I think the models in New York, why are they international famous top models? They must have something the other models don't have. They are more experienced and more professional; they know how to pose for pictures. Whenever you raise your camera, they look at you and smile even if they are super busy. So this shows me what professionalism is about. I think that was one of the most unforgettable trips.

Did you feel you had accomplished your dream when you were there?

Oh yeah. [*Laughs.*] I always wanted to go to New York, and I didn't know when I could go. And suddenly this chance fell on me, unexpected, and I felt like, oh my God, it's really happened to me. And when we landed there and then we were in the taxi on the way to Manhattan, I was still like, "Am I really in New York?" But it's really different—New York and what your idea of New York is, it's really different.

What was the most interesting part of shooting there?

I took pictures of the Chinese top models, like Xi Mengyao (aka Ming Xi) and Liu Wen, walking down the street and after the show we interviewed them about their lifestyle and working as a Chinese model in New York. And Ju Xiaowen who worked with [London-based fashion photographer] Tim Walker and modeled for Prada, we shot a video of her in the taxi and some photos of what she puts in her bag. So that's what I did, both photo shoot and video shoot. We interviewed a lot of fashion designers, Diane von Furstenberg and the designer of Calvin Klein.

Did you feel like a fan when you were talking to some of these big names?

I feel more like a busy worker. You don't have any time to think about you're a fan. I even saw Sarah Jessica Parker walking past me, and she stopped for me to take a photo of her standing in front of me. It's such a mess, there's a lot of photographers, they want to catch what they need so the situation is kind of crazy. You have to just take your camera and press the shutter and do it. Some celebrities are coming backstage and you have to take this moment.

How did people react to your Chinese team?

Once they know you are from Yahoo! China they know you are doing the promotion and they are very accepting. China is very important in the international fashion

What about Shanghai fashion?

Shanghai women love style and high fashion. So they love to have a bag like LV bag or Gucci bag. It's a bit different, their taste is more about they want something expensive and looks good from the outside, looks very luxurious.

Do you think you would have had these opportunities if you hadn't moved to Shanghai?

I really appreciate that I moved to Shanghai. I think that if I didn't, maybe I'd just be working for some normal company daily from 8 to 5. I feel very lucky that I jumped out from this city and got to see more of the world. In Chengdu there are some chances for English majors, but I think Shanghai is a more open city and there are many more opportunities for me.



The photographer in Berlin. All photos by Kyle Fong.

industry—most of the sales and top luxury brands are here in China, and the manufacturing is here. And Chinese models are more successful internationally because of this—they work with more and more famous designers and photographers.

Which city has the best street fashion?

I think London. Also, surprisingly, I found that Melbourne is a fashionable city—a lot of skinny jeans with T-shirts and rocker style or alternative or hipster, it's really the kind of style I like a lot, and there are a lot of independent designers. Of course, Paris. Paris is just very beautiful. It looks like surreal, I felt like I was in a dream when I was there. And you can see some very stylish people dressing in a very high-fashion style. But I personally more prefer the independent and more rock 'n' roll, hipster style.

What do you think about Chengdu when you're back?

The biggest change for me is there's a lot of construction, and the air is a mess. I feel I don't want to breathe the air anymore. Everybody needs to wear a mask. I miss the Chengdu from before I went to Shanghai. It was more clean and quiet. But maybe this is something the city needs to develop and they need to build these things. But I'm thinking do they have to do this? I don't know. Why not keep the city [as it was]?

To see more of Kyle's work, visit www.kylefong.com

Sticky Business

kendo in chengdu



Hitting where it hurts—the dojo's practice opponent, "Bob," receives brutal beatings to the head on a daily basis. Photos by Dan Sandoval.

The first time **Elizabeth Bergen-Bartel's** father put on Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* for his daughter to watch, he unknowingly set into motion a series of events that would lead the lively blonde from Arlington, Virginia, all the way to a kendo dojo in Chengdu, China. From this tentative, film-inspired interest in martial arts, Bergen-Bartel began her kendo practice at the age of 14, and through this practice, she met the man she would later marry, a Chengdunese martial-arts practitioner who was studying at the same university as Bergen-Bartel.

In 2003, the couple decided to move to Chengdu and start careers, she, teaching English, and he, refereeing for the Asian Karate Federation (he holds a sixth-degree black belt in karate), work they continue to this day. Two years later, they opened a kendo club where they both teach and train. In the meantime, they also had two sons, who are starting to practice kendo but "mostly are busy with homework," according to their mom.

Against a backdrop of nonstop energetic battle calls and the sounds of students smacking their bamboo swords (shinai) against helmets, Bergen-Bartel sat down and shared her insights on kendo—the "way of the sword."

What is the state of kendo in China and in Chengdu?

Officially, China joined the international federation in 2009, so before that time it was pretty unofficial. It's slowly just going to different cities. There are lots of people practicing in Beijing and Shanghai—those are the major powerhouses for kendo because there are more foreigners there. Right now China doesn't have a lot of high-ranking practitioners; the highest is fifth *dan* [rank]. Eighth *dan* is the highest rank you can get. I'm third *dan* now, and currently my husband is fourth *dan*, so he's the highest *dan* in the southwest. They have a lot of high-ranking practitioners in Japan, U.S., France, Korea, and Taiwan.

In the southwest [of China], we are the first official club. In China, I think Beijing has the first club, they were founded in 1998. In Chengdu there are a couple other clubs. There are affiliated clubs and then there are non-affiliated clubs. There's quite a few affiliated clubs, I can't remember how many now. Then there's maybe one unaffiliated club that I know of, close to Sichuan University. We host the Chengdu Open in July, we have people coming from all over China, sometimes we get people from Hong Kong if we're lucky, and there's been a couple of Japanese who live in Beijing.

How do people react to it given its ties to Japan?

Originally people were like God, what's this? But then of course you get anime lovers, Japanese-culture lovers, who are interested. And slowly you just get people who are more interested in the sports, martial-arts interest. I think karate, jujitsu, and judo are definitely more widely practiced in China. But kendo's slowly gaining its place. There's a deeper aspect of spiritualism in kendo, I feel. You do a lot of kata [form work], so in general that's the attraction a lot of people have to kendo, and also you get to use a sword, so that's fun. A lot of people get interested [first] in the swords.

“ If I came into a difficult situation, I'd probably just throw my wallet and run. ”



What were your goals and what challenges did you face starting up a kendo school?

For my husband, I think he wanted to be a teacher, he wanted to teach martial arts and he wanted to bring back more purified martial arts to China, to Chengdu because at the time there was only one karate school, and it was not very authentic. So he wanted to bring that kind of culture and let everyone enjoy the physical activity of martial arts.

We had a lot of trouble starting because not many people knew of the martial art, so just promoting kendo was hard, and slowly over the years more and more people were informed about Japanese culture and Japanese martial arts and they came to watch or try out, and that garnered more interest. I think most interest is spread by word of mouth because we don't have a Web site. Occasionally we've done demonstrations at Ito Yokado for Japanese fests, and there were a couple TV programs that we've been on, but we haven't done that much promotion.

How many students do you have, and what kind of people do they tend to be?

We have about 100 who are regular, more than 80 have obtained first-degree black belt or

above. A lot of times there are people who are interested in anime who show up but normally they don't stay that long, sadly. There are other people who come and say, "Wow this is so cool, I want to do it," and they normally stay longer, and now there are more people interested in budo culture. [Students who have practiced other martial arts] have been educated on the culture behind martial arts, so they're not as likely to have preconceived ideas. So they're more adapted to this kind of culture in the first place and so they're more likely to succeed.

Most of the students are full-time workers. We don't have many stay-at-home moms or anything. But we do have a lot of girls—the ratio is about 3:7, female to male. Normally there's a lot more guys in kendo so our dojo's pretty lucky in that way. The jujutsu club is mostly guys—I've only seen one or two girls in there before. We try to promote it toward women more and try to make the women feel equally comfortable as the guys in a situation and if they receive a mis-strike or something we make a joke and make sure the guys don't do it again.

Sometimes there are championships where women compete with men, but usually not in

China. It's more interesting, I find. Men are a lot more physical with their fighting—they use more power—and women are more technical. They're smaller so they have to use technique to succeed in fights. So it's interesting to see them fight with each other.

Are there martial arts that are more female oriented?

There's a martial art in Japan, naginata, it's with a long spear. That's more female-dominated in Japan—I guess it's the culture; a long time ago the women could defend their homes with long spears and still take care of their kids on their backs and guys would go to the battlefield with swords.

How practical would kendo be in a real-life fight?

Not practical. I should just get a gun [*laughs*]. No, it's not very practical. In some way I think having the experience fighting people helps because you can confront people with loud screams and maybe scare them, but if I came into a difficult situation, I'd probably just throw my wallet and run.

How often do you practice, and do you practice any other martial arts?

Typically two to three hours a day. On

the weekend normally more, six hours or something like that. I do iaido and jodo, iaido’s with the real sword, and jodo’s with a staff, and I started karate recently but I’m not practicing regularly.

Do you think there’s a kendo-*Star Wars* connection?
I don’t think I’m qualified to judge what George Lucas had in mind! But I think the ethics behind the Jedi philosophy is kind of connected to kendo or budo culture in general; I think that’s what inspired the Jedi knights, I don’t know. I think George Lucas said *The Hidden Fortress* was one of the films that inspired him to write Episode 4.

Have you participated in major tournaments?
We have five national team members that participated in the last world championships in Italy. My husband and I participated in the previous world championships, the 14th world championships [in Brazil]. So I actually got to play as a [China national] team member—a lot of people were like, “What? There’s a blond girl on the Chinese team?” It confuses the hell out of people. People who have practiced in the country and technically started in the country can get permission from the national organization to play for the national team. So since I got my first *dan* in China, I’m considered like a Chinese practitioner. It’s a little strange.

And you’ve won some too, right?
I’ve won the women’s division national championship twice in China.

Have you received any honors or accolades from the government for your work?
I wish! Not yet. Kendo’s very small compared to the other sports in China, and it’s not officially recognized as a sport so the government is not that interested in it. But I think slowly as the popularity grows the government will get more involved. Right now they’re getting pretty involved through the wushu association. Some tournaments have prize money, but not in China. Here, there are trophies and equipment for prizes.

What’s the best way to train?
I think a lot of smart and hard training helps, and understanding that it takes a long time to build up the proper techniques and ability to use your body along with the sword. So just knowing yourself and practicing hard and practicing right will help you. Training right, knowing yourself and having a cause I think is what’s going to help.

What does kendo bring to you?
I think kendo’s a good way to learn more about yourself, your own spirit—that’s a little out there, but that’s why I do kendo, to learn more about myself and overcome my weaknesses.

Mugen Ryu Martial Arts Academy offers courses in kendo, jujutsu, iaido, jodo, budo taijutsu, and self-defense for women. Classes are held on weeknights and during the daytime on weekends. See listings for address.



Found in Translation

sichuan poetry notes

By Catherine Platt
Illustration by Jessie Brett



A Love Poem from Emei Mountain

Sichuan’s Song dynasty polymath Su Shi (1037–1101) was a prolific poet. In addition to treatises on travel, gastronomy, hydraulic engineering and other technical subjects, he wrote some exquisite love poetry, including haunting verses in memory of his two wives and one concubine, all of whom died before he did.

Also known as Su Dongpo, Su Shi was a master of the *ci* (词) or *changduanju* (长短句, lines of irregular length) form of classical poetry. While much classical poetry is written in quatrains of five or seven-character lines, *ci* poetry is more varied as it was originally written as lyrics to accompany particular tunes. A *ci* is based on one of around 800 set patterns of rhythm, tone, and line length, each with a title (*cipai*) based on the music that it was originally written for. The *cipai* is that of the original tune and may have nothing to do with the content.

The poem here is a well known example of the *ci* form, written by Su Shi in memory of his first wife, Wang Fu. The couple married in 1055 in their hometown near Emei Mountain and had one son, Su Mai, but Wang Fu died within ten years at the age of 27. Although Su Shi married again soon afterward, he continued to mourn his first wife. He wrote this poem after dreaming of her one night. I have included two other translations of the poem in addition to my own. The first is a lovely version that crops up frequently, but I have not been able to find a translation credit: if anyone knows who wrote it, please let me know. The second version is by the novelist Qiu Xiaolong (Mountainsongs.net).

江城子 苏轼

十年生死两茫茫，
不思量，自难忘。
千里孤坟，无处话凄凉。
纵使相逢应不识，
尘满面，鬓如霜。
夜来幽梦忽还乡，
小轩窗，正梳妆。
相顾无言，唯有泪千行。
料得年年肠断处，
明月夜，短松冈。

Jiàng Chéng Zǐ

Shíníán shēng sǐ liǎng máng máng,
After ten years life and death alike are boundless

Bù sī liáng, zì nán wàng.
Thoughts unmeasured, I cannot forget

Qiānlǐ gūfén, wú chù huà qīliáng.
That lonely grave a thousand miles away,
nowhere can I speak of my sorrow

Zòng shǐ xiāngféng yīng bù shí,
Even if we met you would not know me,

Chén mǎn miàn, bìn rú shuāng.
My dust-blown face, my frost-white hair.

Yè lái yōu mèng hū hái xiāng,
In the dim night I dream and suddenly am home

Xiǎo xuān chuāng, zhèng shū zhuāng.
By the high window you are getting dressed.

Xiāng gù wú yán, wéi yǒu lèi qiānháng.
We gaze at each other silently, tears flowing,

Liào dé nián nián cháng duàn chù,
Will my heart ache this way for years to come

Míng yuè yè, duǎn sōng gāng.
For this bright moon night, that low pine hill?

To the Tune of “River Town”
Ten years living and dead have drawn apart
I do nothing to remember
But I cannot forget
Your lonely grave a thousand miles away ...
Nowhere can I talk of my sorrow --
Even if we met, how would you know me
My face full of dust
My hair like snow?

In the dark of night, a dream: suddenly,
I am home
You by the window
Doing your hair
I look at you and cannot speak
Your face is streaked by endless tears
Year after year must they break my heart
These moonlit nights?
That low pine grave?

Ten Years (To the Tune of Jiangchengzi)
Ten years, ten years: nothingness
between life and death.
I try not to think, but I forget not.
The solitary grave
thousands of miles away.
Where else can I tell
the sorrow of my heart?
You would not recognize me if we met:
my face dust-covered,
my temples frost white.
Last night
the dream brought me back
to our old home, where,
by the small window,
you were applying your
make-up.
We gazed at each other
in silence
our tears flowing.
It must be the same heart-breaking scene
year after year,
the bright moon night
the short pine hill.

Miss Single

a whole without an other half

By Tan Juan
Illustration by Meike Männel



“No matter how bad you are, there is always somebody who loves you. No matter how good you are, there is always somebody who doesn’t love you.” — attributed to Chinese writer Eileen Chang (张爱玲)

As a teenager, I had a clear description of Mr. Right: He is Chinese, healthy, and not bald. The details went on: He is 1.78 to 1.8 meters tall, appropriately taller than me. He is fit, interested in sports and, even better, he is good at sports, especially basketball, my favorite. He sings well so that I can enjoy it when we go to KTV. He is bold, decisive, responsible, filial, and every other positive attribute missing in myself so that we complement each other.

But even as this happily-ever-after dream faded as I grew up, Mr. Right never appeared.

Then again, neither did Mr. Wrong, and the dream eventually faded out completely. When one of my friends came back to Chengdu during the Spring Festival, she asked me about what kind of men I was interested in. My answer was ... I had no idea. During my 20s, when my girlfriends stayed with Mr. Wrong while they reviewed their lists for Mr. Right, I came to understand that no man would meet all the criteria on my checklist. Maybe I would fall in love with somebody I couldn’t picture at all—maybe he would be shorter than me, bald, and a sports idiot.

My friends, especially the females, cannot understand why I am still single, being such a nice woman. I used to think it was because I was not beautiful enough or slim enough. But after seeing plenty of women who were neither slim nor gorgeous get married, I decided that wasn’t it. And I decided, furthermore, there was nothing wrong in my being single.

But from time to time, the question would creep up. Why me? Or rather, why *not* me?

An icebreaker for a work-related conference I participated in took the format of a speed date, and all of us were asked whether we were single. Most men lightheartedly joked that they were “MBA” (married but available). Most women said they were not in any kind of romantic relationship. All of these were professional consultants at the top of their field. Being so-called successful women (making good money working for multinationals), we frequently worked overtime. So obviously, the first problem was that I had no time for men. But I have time for friends, books, movies, parties, and other things, so that wasn’t the answer.

Is it because successful women pursue more successful men? Maybe for some single women, this pyramid theory holds true, but not for me: I am looking for a man I want and need but not necessarily one who is conventionally successful. I prefer the explanation that successful women are more independent both economically and psychologically, and thus they can afford to be more concerned with the right choice rather than just picking one before it’s too late.

But even if I’ve accepted my singleness, most people around me seem to hold that a marriage, even if it is a failure, is still better than none. So, since that’s their attitude, they can tell me why I’m single too. I polled a dozen of my close friends and family members to see why they think I’m single.

Males

Michael (32, in a stable relationship, friend, former colleague): “I think compatibility matters when choosing the ‘other half.’ Since you have a good job and are well paid and you are mentally independent, fewer men are compatible.”

Jesse (29, in a struggling relationship, close friend, gay): “Mr. Right has not shown up.”

Eliot (37, breaking up with his girlfriend, friend and former subordinate): “Establishing a relationship is similar to selling a product, and the product is you. Different products have different features and attractions. Unluckily most men do not use their head, so hot girls are popular products compared with women of thoughts.”

Xinmin (61, divorced, father): “Mr. Right has not shown up. And you are too busy.”

Jerry (28, single, soul mate): “Because you are not fond of the people who are fond of you, and the people who you are fond of are not fond of you, and the people who you are fond of and are fond of you are married to other people.”

Gino (32, single, friend, former colleague): “You think too independently.”

Haha. Is there a problem with my male sample? None is married, and only one is in a happy relationship.

Females

Indie (29, in a stable relationship, close friend, lesbian): “I think the richness of your heart/inner world is beyond men’s control. However, I love you soooo much.”

T (30, married in 2011, close friend of 10+ years): “You have not met Mr. Right in the right time at the right place.”

Sasha (30, divorced, close friend of 15 years): “Mr. Right has not shown up.”

Sherona (41, divorced, cousin): “You didn’t know to find a boyfriend in school when busy with studies. You don’t have time to find a boyfriend when your work is too occupying. With high education background and high accomplishment, it is difficult for you now to find a boyfriend compatible to you.”

Iki (56, divorced, mother): “I don’t know the reason, and it is your own business. You have not met the right person and you don’t meet guys who I wanted to introduce to you.”

Bonnie (26, just breaking up with her boyfriend, friend and former subordinate): “It is in the end a mistake for two people being together; the key lies in whether one can stand such a mistake. But there are people who do not stand mistakes and you are one of them.”

Their answers can be boiled down to two different explanations: one about lot and destiny, the situation is beyond one’s control: He just hasn’t come. The other group is about compatibility: My independence and my job make it difficult for me to find a man. But wait a minute! Is there also problem with my female sample? I did not realize the marital status, or lack thereof, of most of my friends until this survey. Perhaps they have influenced me.

Having turned 30 last year, I feel I have crossed a threshold. When I was 25, I thought I could wait until 30. When I turned 30, I started to think I may stay single forever because nowadays everything has a price, and my price is going down, as most would say. On the contrary, I love myself more after 30. I decide to be a better person for a man who knows, understands, and loves me rather than just any boyfriend or husband, even though that man may never show up.

“You have not met Mr. Right in the right time at the right place.”

Chengdu in Pictures

words with a graphic novelist

Hamburg-based comic artist and graphic novelist **Sascha Hommer**, 34, was inspired to create a graphic novel set in China after a visit to Chengdu in 2005. A longer stay in 2011 provided further material for the project, which he's now working on alongside his regular work on comic strips and illustrations for magazines, newspapers, and other print media or organizing comic festivals and culture exchanges in far corners of the world. Longtime readers of CHENGDOO might recall Sascha's illustrations in previous issues or the CHENGDOO citylife board game that he co-designed and illustrated. He spent a few moments talking about his inspiration for and progress on the book project.



How did you end up in Chengdu and why did you decide to make a book about it?

The first time I came to Chengdu was to visit a friend in 2005, and I stayed for two months just for fun. [After that], I wanted to make a book about China mostly because of the one-sided reporting about the Olympic Games in 2008. I was very annoyed by the anti-Chinese sentiment in German media, and although I'm not a China expert—I can't even speak Mandarin—just being in contact with people in China and the fact that I'd been to China before gave me the strong feeling that the guys who wrote these articles didn't really know what they were doing. This was the starting point to question the reporting, and I thought it should be possible to present other aspects of the country, and in a different manner.

So with the idea of writing a book about China I arrived for a second time in 2011, but once there I quickly understood that it's nonsense to make a book about China; it's too big, and I don't really know anything about it. But it's different with Chengdu, although I wasn't there for too long, because I had a different access to the city and views the normal tourist wouldn't be able to see, and besides, this book is now my very own and personal story where I document what I've experienced. It doesn't

claim to be enlightening, not in a didactic way, anyway, but maybe it could be enlightening in a more subtle way, especially in regard to the reception of the local culture by the expat community.

I don't want to make a book that people buy and think, "Oh now I get to understand the culture in Chengdu." It shouldn't be a travel guide either. It'll be a rather surreal report, where I simply attempt to find a form to reflect what I have seen and the people I met.

When did you start actual work on the book?

The work already started back in 2011, before I arrived in Chengdu. I read a lot about the city and China, books like *The Chinese World*, and did online research. During my second stay I drew a diary, simple scribbles only I can decipher, which later allowed me to check what happened every day. Between the pages I added random flyers or other papers I came across.

Part of my research was the work for CHENGDOO, which allowed me to get to know the city in ways the ordinary tourist usually wouldn't experience—with, for example, a bike and a predetermined route of stations for magazine distribution which enabled me,

despite my general lack of orientation, to draw an inner city map, or at least of some districts of Chengdu.

Now it's been nearly two years since you were in Chengdu. How does the time distance affect your work?

Back in 2009 I made a book about my time in school in the '90s (*Four Eyes*), and the time distance from the source material in this case was much bigger, but it's interesting to work with your memories, to see how you have been and how your own life worked. At one point you understand that you don't know the chronological sequence of events and that certain etched versions of stories in your memory don't add up once you analyze them more thoroughly.

So for the Chengdu book I use the diary and the storyboard as tools, but if a scene works better at the end of the book, I move it. If I really stuck to the storyboard I'd get bored. It just hangs there on the wall for reference. It's not about keeping actual chronology or the logical sequence of actual events, because at the end there must be a certain logic visible for the reader.

“I quickly understood that it's nonsense to make a book about China; it's too big, and I don't really know anything about it.”

What are some of the motifs that appear in the book?

The quake and stories in general, and stories of rats and cockroaches. A less prominent motif is going to work—I read German texts for recordings as a part-time job. Another is inner rooms and flats. What do flats look like? I had to search for a flat or a room, and that search stretched over two weeks. And table tennis. Only marginally I touch on backpacker hostels because I spent two weeks there, actually a totally boring topic, but because I had to go there against my will, the processed experience may become again an epiphany.

And what about the characters in the book?

The figures are depicted schematically and mask-like to prevent, from the very beginning, readers thinking that I intend to present a portrayal of reality. So the acting characters are shown as aliens. Besides me, there are two main characters who are my friends, and the rest are more or less casual acquaintances who carry one or two motifs or parts of the action, although at the moment I'm not sure which I will finally include and which I may drop because they don't carry enough importance.



Illustration from Sascha Hommer's upcoming graphic novel about Chengdu. Text reads, "This is my atelier."

In any case there are scenes with lots of people in bars sitting together. In the book about my youth I decided to merge several real persons to one character as they symbolize something similar and to simplify of course.

When you draw people, they are always a bit cuddly but also a bit disconcerting. Why this mix?

It's a graphical shift into an absurd sphere that creates a certain tension. When I draw a figure with a big head and small body—proportions you recognize as being of infants—but the character acts as an adult, it may come off as creepy. But in many stories which would otherwise seem trivial, it creates a tension I enjoy. Especially in this project it's important for me not to be realistic, not to create a reportage in the original sense, not a portrait of reality. That way it's clear this is a subjective report, and hopefully that is a way that is more telling than a realistic illustration.

So what did you notice about the people in Chengdu?

What stood out in my opinion was that the foreigners who live here together are randomly

cobbled from different corners and have to arrange their lives together and of course together with the locals, and especially in the cultural sense have to produce everything they want themselves.

It seemed that the foreigners there fall into two categories—the ones that were accidentally stranded in the city and those who consciously decided to go to Chengdu, and this mix is on one hand a bit dysfunctional, but on the other hand it's always an open structure. That also means that a lot of things go wrong and a lot of activities are temporary and noncommittal.

Will we see the book translated into other languages? What about Chinese?

There are good chances for a French translation as my last books appeared in France, which is a very important market. That has a signaling effect, which then again could automatically draw translations into other languages, even more so than publication of my book in my home market.

I don't know enough about the Chinese market, and I guess there wouldn't be many publishing houses which come into question, but it's a young market that is developing rapidly so the situation could be changing already. I'd love to see a translation into Chinese, but such a translation wouldn't be as simple as a translation to French, for example, as the book is aimed at the European reader or anyone else who

“It seemed that the foreigners there fall into two categories—the ones that were accidentally stranded in the city and those who consciously decided to go to Chengdu.”



Faces of Bangladesh

Text and photos by Michal Pachniewskii

After living in China for six years I thought I fully understood the meaning of words like “crowded,” “dusty,” “noisy,” and “chaotic.” As it turned out, I couldn’t have been more wrong—Bangladesh makes China look deserted! With 160 million people crammed into an area three times smaller than Sichuan, it is the most densely populated large country in the world. It is intense, it is messy, it is unique.

One of my friends told me that he had heard stories of people going to Bangladesh and then getting back on the plane out the very same day. I can believe it.

I landed in Dhaka, paid 50 USD for a visa on arrival, and my adventure began. To fully experience the intensity of the place, I stayed in the old part of the city. I thought I was prepared, but even with my previous exposure to the Indian subcontinent, Bangladesh tested my nerves and patience and pushed me out of my comfort zone. I will never complain again about the bad traffic back home! I will appreciate the effectiveness of Chengdu’s traffic light system, the importance of bus schedules, and the comfort of brushing my teeth with tap water.

But there would be no Bangladesh without the people! Despite facing poverty, corruption, and vulnerability to climate change, the people I encountered were incredibly friendly, generous, curious and open-hearted, at times bombarding me with questions. Besides encounters with locals, the country has a lot to offer: Tea plantations in the northeast, the biggest mangrove forest in the world (Sundarbans), the world’s longest natural sandy sea beach, fishing with otters, amazingly sweet and tasty cakes and desserts are a few of the things that make the country worth a visit.





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Basi de Hen

your monthly guide to CD cool!

Souped-up showers



I try to be positive in Basi de Hen!, but this month I want to talk about something in Chengdu that's really annoying. I'll give you 10 guesses as to what it is. Too hard? OK, I'll just tell you: leaky showers. Every single apartment I've ever lived in here has or has had a bathtub or shower stall that leaked water all over the floor every time it was used, no matter what I did to stop it.


I tried arranging and rearranging the shower curtain in various ways, and once I even glued in a plastic barrier thingy, but all was to no avail. And Chengdu being as wet as it is, having a wet floor every day after you take a shower means that even if you use a mop, the floor is wet most of the time. (I'm sure you must have realized this too.) Having a little one around the house, it became even more annoying: Every time my son would use the toilet after someone had showered, we'd have to be extra careful that he didn't

slip and fall. I've also been in a number of hotels, in Chengdu and other parts of Sichuan, of various star ratings that have the same problem. Definitely not basi. In fact, I'd go so far as to say it's *fan de hen!* Then one day—in the shower, naturally, from whence all good ideas spring—a solution dawned on me. This is the simple solution that has made all the difference.

We bought a second shower curtain, in the same color as the one we already had, and overlapped it with the old one on half of the rings, those closest to the shower head. Then we got one of those picture hangers that are indispensable for hanging on concrete walls: the kind with three little nails sticking out of a white plastic hook. We hammered it in on the wall near the corner of the shower next to the shower head, a bit higher than the shower head. Then we simply turned the new shower curtain at a right angle from where it hung

on the bar, hung the excess half of the new shower curtain on the hook, passing it just under the shower head so that the shower head sticks up above the extra curtain, and voila! Success! Since then, not one drop of water has leaked on the floor, because everything stays well in the tub. My (totally without evidence, but hopeful) theory is that in the long run, this not only saves us from the annoying problem of a constantly wet bathroom floor, but on the water bill as well because the full spray goes on whoever's in there, rather than ricocheting out of the tub. At the very least, in the cooler months, I did notice that it made the whole tub area feel warmer, which must have saved on electricity and water, because I didn't have to turn it up as hot or as high as before. It's not often that you can solve one of life's persistent problems with a low-tech solution for about 20 RMB!

—DF



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