

## Working In China

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Guest post by Shannon Fagan

My post a couple of years ago about jobs in China on A Photo Editor, occasionally generates some interested persons to reach out and take the time to email me about working in Beijing, Shanghai, or perhaps Shenzhen. There have been no takers that I am aware of for the jobs though, and the reasons are interesting, curious, worthy of review. I'm now at the two and a half years point in my relocation from New York City to Beijing; well beyond the rose-colored glasses, but not blinded by the smog either. This is an update to that storyline, which I thought would be interesting to APE's readership, all of who undoubtedly hear a lot about the wonders of the Chinese economy. So bizarre and numerous are the stories in the news, that now The New York Times, Getty Images, and iStockphoto are all blocked in China along with just about every serious social media outlet produced in the United States, including Facebook, Twitter and Youtube.

Shaun Rein, an agile entrepreneurial consultant to industries interested in relocations to China, and I occasionally trade communication about the amazing adjustments necessary here and which make working in China as a small foreign business very difficult. Add on top of these situations, that I have initiated a creative-based business, and it's been a ripe learning experience. In under the first two years, I bailed a job applicant out of a silence-only windowless detention center, was blackmailed by a college student intern, was locked inside of a store and manhandled to purchase knockoff wardrobe, been visited by local officials bearing cameras and voice recorders, been encouraged to pay countless kickbacks (particularly for models), had company salaries removed from the office (while I was on vacation), and then blocked from the market of Mainland China by a competitor. It's thus a little tongue and cheek to say that I have learned more about operational fundamentals in Beijing via episodes of AMC's Breaking Bad, than stories in Businessweek. That is not to say that McKinsey and Company level expertise is not warranted in this market, but rather that such operational mechanisms are handled, as Shaun Rein has reminded me, at the Fortune 500 level, and not the small entrepreneurial startup arena of 50 workers or less, locally referred to as SMEs (Small Medium Enterprises).

China is amazingly interesting now; yes, despite the hurdles. We just saw the initiation of a new government and officially mandated Five Year Plan adjustment. The country is blossoming in subtlety as I learn the local language and become increasingly aware of the social context framework I have, and I really do believe this, the hardest working production team that I have ever had anywhere, here now operational in Beijing. We're having fun (it's important to remember that) and we're making images in droves that were never available before to the Chinese economy (our modus operandi). All are model and property released with technical specifications for global advertising, from a market overflowing in IPR theft and with little historical involvement in international advertising. It's an entrepreneurial venture that has awakened in me all the challenges that I was seeking and for which New York City no longer provided during The Great Recession of 2008 forward.

This write-up is an insider's take on the notorious economy in China for foreign commercial art creatives interested in participating. It is important to know that the manner of the mechanics of the economy here in China are different than in the US, where equal opportunity meets equal amounts of work. China is very much divided in the scope of work available and where the jobs are going. In the years since the post on APE, I have come to know, and probably more so accept, that the economy in China is and will be for a very long time barred from foreign participation unless the individual is embedded near permanently locally. This makes what may seem like "doing business in China" very difficult for one-off trips of assignment work. That does not mean that there is no opportunity to pursue, but those opportunities would be best spent (for a foreigner's time and money), in contacting the normal routes of introduction to clients...i.e., ad agencies in Asia, or, better yet, advertising/design agencies in the West with the interests in sending a photographer abroad to do the work.

That's the short take.

The longer take, important to us all since this is looking to be among the preeminent future economies in the world, is that the reasons for this lay within the manner in which the Chinese economy is situating itself. The meat and potatoes are essentially this: there are two types of jobs in China.

In Group 1, are the Chinese client jobs aimed to local talent; primarily focused on price (about 1/3rd the foreign norm), and not particularly focused on creative achievement but rather "technical achievement" (can the chosen worker do the work performed?). A lot of the latter deals with lacks of trust running between Chinese society and their government, the manners of establishing credibility in the market, the educational system setup, and the like. The work is provided through networks of communication (one's work relationships), and it takes time to get those and even longer to maintain them. One would have to be in China to navigate this, and I do not see this system changing in the near future. If one had an interest in pursuing Chinese clientele, the scope of obtaining the jobs is much more labor intensive than a drop of a portfolio and massage of a budget. One would have to be in the trust network, and provide a lot of pre-emptive service to estimate, re-estimate, shoot tests, and the like, in order to establish an assignment. This would be an assignment, which in the end, would not generally remunerate for the time to do this setup work. Thus, the market is going to remain segmented. To do this from abroad is logistically not possible. As Shaun mentions, "it can be challenging for foreign creatives to work with Chinese clients, as historically Chinese firms are not willing to pay top dollar for creative services and consulting while they are for something tangible like hardware."

In Group 2, there is foreign client work using both local and foreign talent and the works budgeted according to both international price and local price. It varies widely and depends on the job. These jobs are often being situated in editorial focus, such as events and news stories, corporate portraits, and similar kinds of work. Actual advertising work is channeled for Westerners by the Westerner being connected primarily to the Western client before China becomes the focus. Thus, the system in which one has a potential client knowledgeable about their commercial artwork, and the client happens to have an assignment in China, or India, or Chile, or Fargo, North Dakota. This manner protects the photographer for licensing and payment, the bigger concern being simply getting paid. The local established method of money trading hands in China is almost always one half of the money up front, and the other half upon delivery. This delivery part can leave the living-abroad individual hanging if there are not protective mechanisms in the middle. One has very little power in Chinese legal systems (both Chinese and foreigners alike).

After two years, numerous jobs have come across my desk, but in nearly every case they have fallen into one of the two groups above. Time and again, interestingly, I have listened to foreign photographers living in China resolutely state that all their work is generated from foreign-only clients, and I found this odd. Odd because, often their experience, their years on the ground, their language abilities, even their Chinese friends, would all seem to suggest that other options were available to these candidates. But I did not come across situations where this factually, more than hearsay, appeared to be the case in marketing and actual work performed. It could be that this market in China is generally quite underdeveloped in maturity compared to the Western focus of photography/creative economies seen in other major cities where there is mentorship, "rules" of engagement, and situations inducing competition to innovate. Certainly this is the case to a large degree, as standardization is wide here, but still difficult to measure since there is no over encompassing organization and each individual is mostly left to his/her own manners of development.

China is a very interesting place and economy. In many ways, I wish that there were more easily-situated work available to back up the post online a couple years back, but what I came to learn was that those offers were in Group 1 above, and generally not realistically obtained for those working outside of China. It may be the case that as my understanding of Chinese work and life continues, I will see yet another subtlety to the situation and go back on my analysis here as to why these market offers of work are not being met with foreigners showing up and actually doing that work. Clearly there is money flowing in China and there is work to be had, but it's the mechanisms and logistics that are barring foreign operators from participation. China has everything that the West has, but it has its own local version: YouKu is China's YouTube, Weibo is our Facebook, and all of these established Western websites are blocked. This should give a taste for the complications and when one multiplies them by the idiosyncrasies of daily life, it makes what seems as easy as a plane ticket and visa, quite relatively removed.

The bottom line is this: One, do not expect it to be easy to work in China. Two, do not expect on-the-ground support to the degree of comfort and planning that the West offers. Three, plan to exercise a great deal of patience upon each setback. Four, plan on needing to be present for supervision and quality control throughout the process. Five, the cultural barrier is greater than the language barrier. Six, jobs pay less. Seven, everything is transient, have multiple backup plans. Eight, China isn't inexpensive for foreign businesses anymore. Nine, the Kung Po Chicken tastes better. Ten, the Chinese experience is exhilarating.



This is an image of the sun on a typical bad air quality day in the summer in Beijing. Ironically, for as unpleasant as it is to be outside in such conditions, it can be favorable for the overcast lighting effect and warm color hues that it creates for productions.



This is my smog and UV shield combination that I sometimes use when bicycling around Beijing.



Location scouting in China requires a lot of on the ground hustle and relationship building. Given the hurdles for cultural and language differences, we've seen great results by presenting our portfolio and team in person at target locations that we wish to shoot at. We do this in combination with our work in the community to develop mutually beneficial business relationships.



Outdoor locations in Beijing are relatively easy to shoot in since they generally do not require a permit. However, it takes a dance of logistics and conversation should local security arrive. It requires experience to understand who is real security and who is simply instigating trouble for a kickback payment. There are times when we politely engage, and other times when we know that we should wrap set and move on.



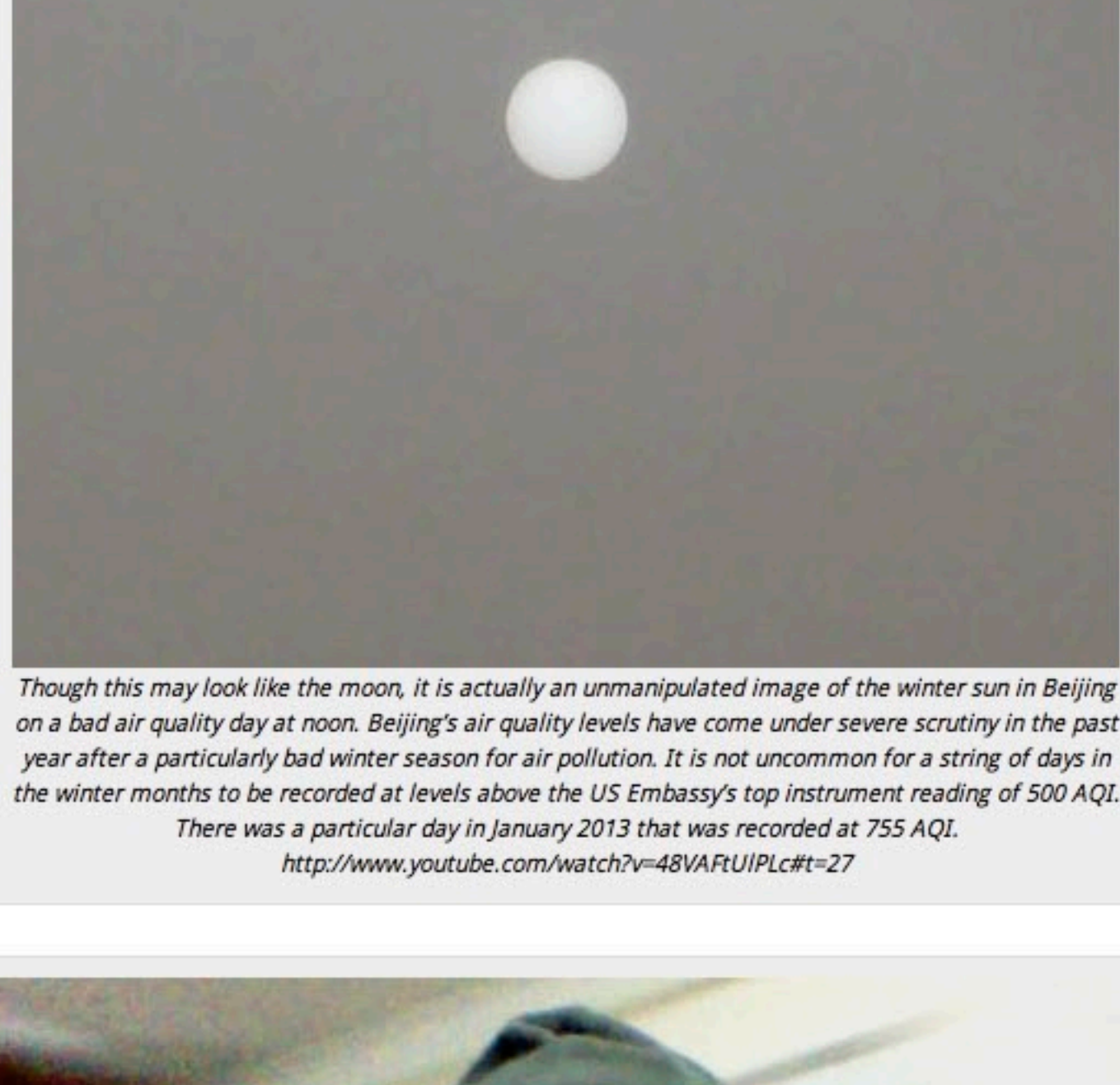
My newest favorite piece of equipment is my ultra tall Gitzo tripod. Obtaining international brand photo gear in China can be difficult since the choices are limited. I often transport new items to China after trips back to the United States. Repairs are equally complicated since international shipping is usually required.



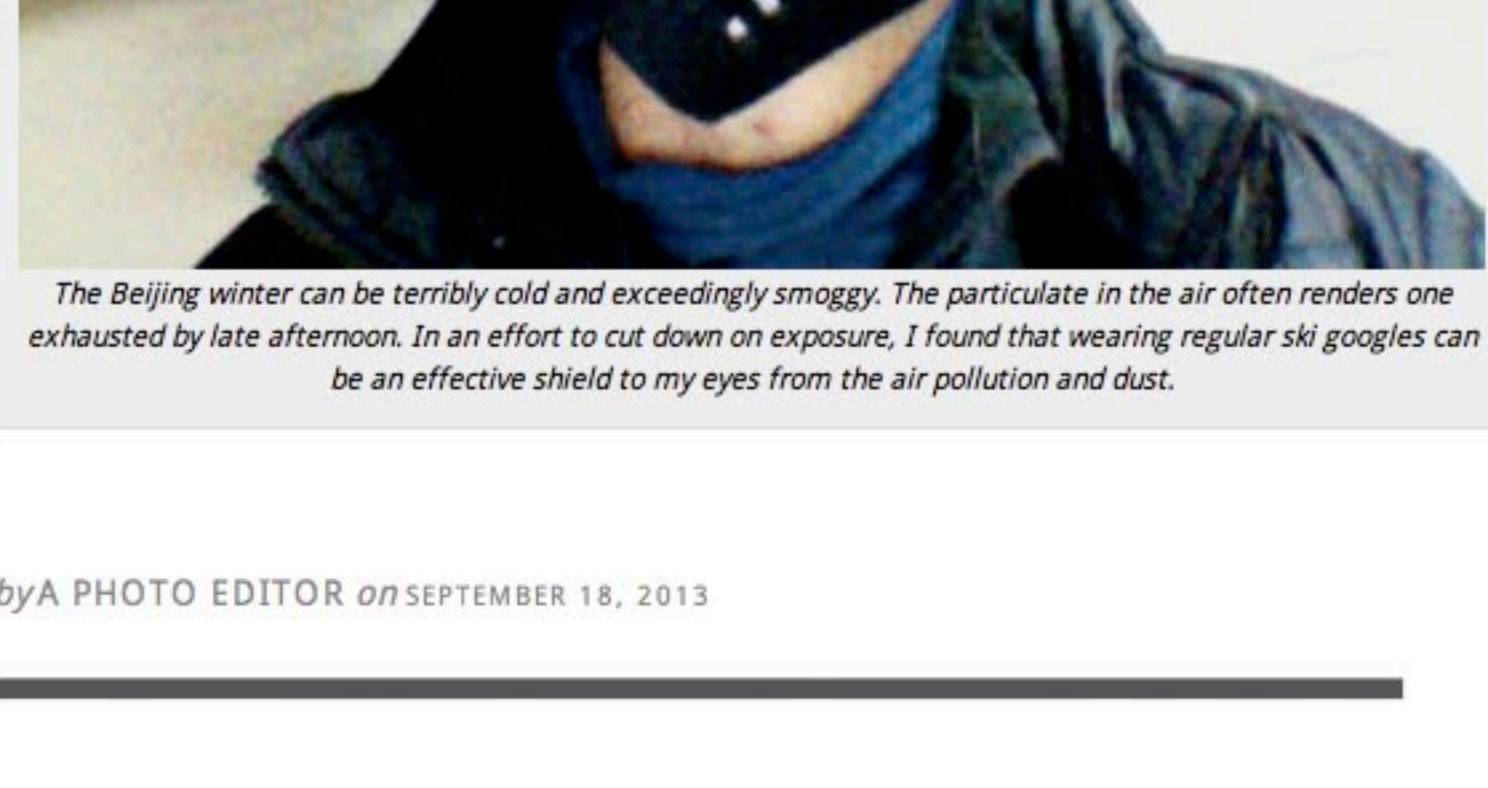
We're often involved in the local community with hands-on demos and recruiting from the local schools, whether that be from photo education, design schools, or business programs. Our best local job candidates come from a variety of backgrounds. There really is no one rule in hiring for production and photography work here. We have developed an in-house method to train our assistants since there is very little mentorship for this profession in China.



This is a behind-the-scenes image from our cover shoot for Time Out Beijing's "Old Beijing" issue in February 2012. It later was voted as our best cover in Time Out Beijing's 100 Issue history.



Though this may look like the moon, it is actually an unmanipulated image of the winter sun in Beijing on a bad air quality day at noon. Beijing's air quality levels have come under severe scrutiny in the past year after a particularly bad winter season for air pollution. It is not uncommon for a string of days in the winter months to be recorded at levels above the US Embassy's top instrument reading of 500 AQI. There was a particular day in January 2013 that was recorded at 755 AQI. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BVARUIPLcrt=27](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BVARUIPLcrt)



The Beijing winter can be terribly cold and exceedingly smoggy. The particulate in the air often renders one exhausted by late afternoon. In an effort to cut down on exposure, I found that wearing regular ski goggles can be an effective shield to my eyes from the air pollution and soot.

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