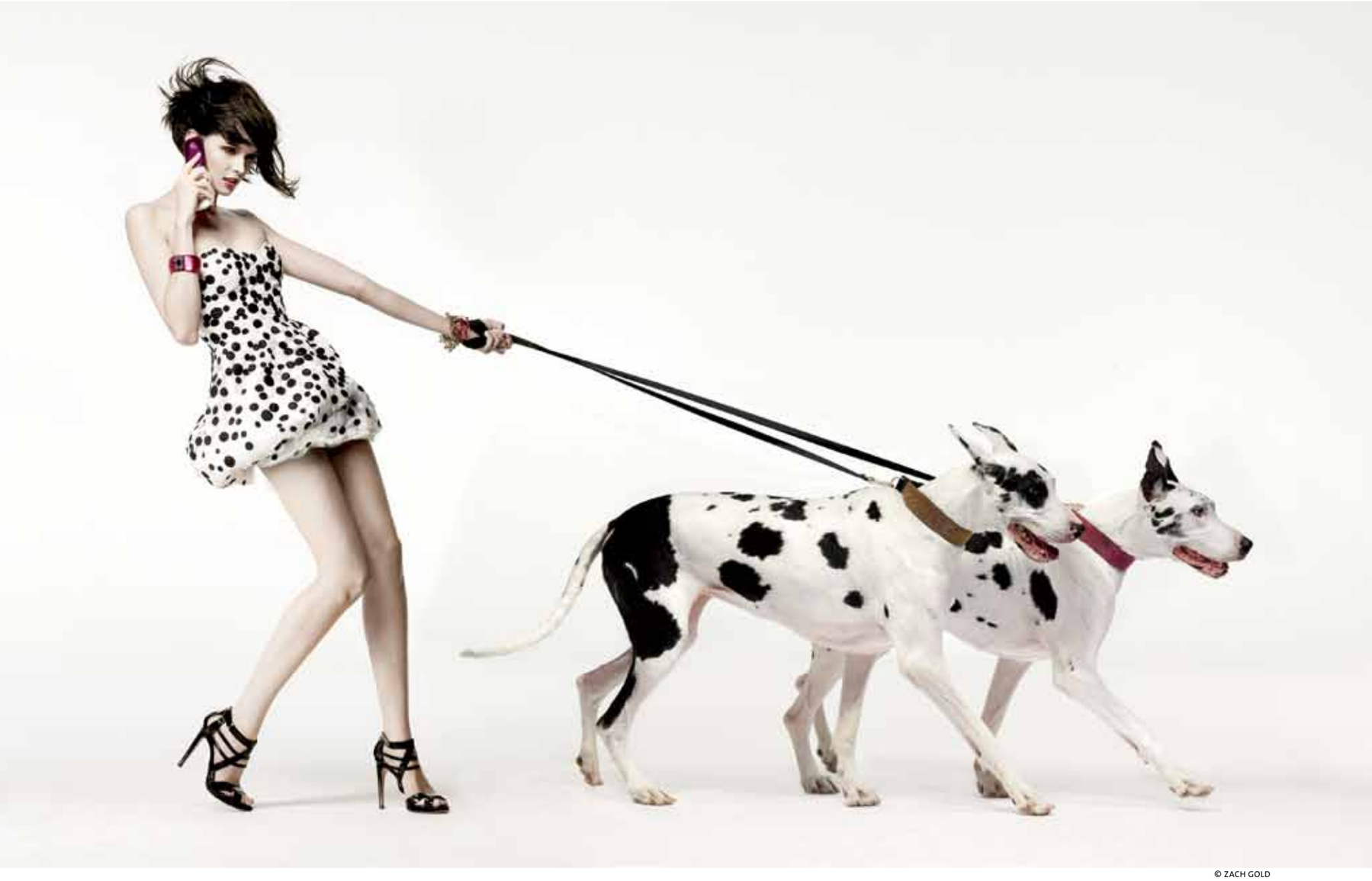
CHINA CONUNDRUM:

Weighing the Rewards and Challenges of a New Market for Assignment Work

CHINA'S ADVERTISING MARKET IS EXPANDING FAST, AND FOREIGN PHOTOGRAPHERS HAVE CACHET WITH CLIENTS AND AD AGENCIES THERE. BUT SHOOTING FOR CHINESE CLIENTS IS NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART. BY DAVID WALKER



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New York photographer Zach Gold says shooting assignments in China can be a lot of fun, if you can take the maddening aspects of it in stride. "It's like the Wild West," he says. "All of the sudden there's all this money, and not that many people know what they're doing."

Gold has shot campaigns in China for Motorola, Nestea, the Italian sportswear brand Kappa, and most recently the World Gold Council. He's shot in studios that have lights rigged with ropes, cyc walls that are chipped and cracked, and floors that are "almost like dirt." The bathrooms are "still just a hole in the ground," unspeakably disgusting, "and there's a $200,000 production going on in the next room. The contrast is remarkable."

Mark Zibert of Toronto has shot about half a dozen campaigns in China over the last several years, starting with a mammoth production for Adidas, just before the 2008 Beijing Olympics. It was a four-day shoot that called for 300 extras. "No way we could have afforded to shoot that here," he says. But he also recalls landing in China with all his gear—and having to ship it back because he couldn't get it through customs.

"I spent a week begging and borrowing gear. It was definitely a fiasco," he says. But in the end, the campaign won a Gold Lion award at Cannes, which raised Zibert's stock with Chinese clients, and led to the assignments he's received since.

GROWING NUMBERS OF PHOTOGRAPHERS in the U.S. and Europe are going after work in China because it looks, from a distance at least, like a pot of gold. The economy in the west is sluggish, competition is fierce, and rates are stagnant. China holds out the promise of new opportunities.

"The market is huge, and photography is still an immature industry," says Michael Choo, a Hong Kong-based photographer and producer who helps foreign photographers manage productions throughout Asia. Chinese ad agencies and production houses are hiring foreign photographers with styles and skills that they can't find in China—at least not yet, Choo says. Until Chinese photographers catch up, "there will be lots of opportunity," he asserts.

But others are a lot less sanguine. "There's work, but you have to be a certain type of photographer, able to deal with the crap clients throw at you. And there's not the amount of work people imagine," says Sion Millett, owner of Bloc Productions in Beijing, which represents Gold and several other western photographers. One of them, Simon Stock of London, says "China is not an easy to market to work in, and it's not a market that will make you rich."

Bernstein & Andriulli, the artists' rep agency in New York, is also struggling to make a go of it in China. They set up an office in Beijing 18 months ago. It's not yet profitable, however, according to agency principle Howard Bernstein, who views it as a bet on future growth in ad spending in China. "It's not as if marketers are spending a lot, but I believe they will once they see advertising work and [their businesses] start to grow."

AGAINST THAT CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM, several people interviewed for this story say opportunities for foreign photographers have actually diminished in the last several years, following an encouraging spike in ad production around the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The lousy world economy is partly to blame. Millett says advertising assignments for foreigners are "sporadic, and it's certainly not increasing." Gold says he shoots three or four jobs in China—editorial and commercial—per year. Dallas-based Stewart Cohen, who is represented by a Beijing agency called Red&Raw, says he's shot in China four times in the last two years.

Jasper James, a British photographer who was encouraged by Getty to relocate to China in 2009 for growing assignment opportunities, says he struggles

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Zach Gold says he shoots three or four jobs a year in China, both editorial and commercial, including this one (opposite page) for Motorola. This page: Stewart Cohen has shot in China four times in the last two years. Top: Buttons and pins of Mao Zedong. Bottom: A fishbowl centerpiece for a table setting at a restaurant in Shanghai.

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to get jobs from Chinese clients. He sustains himself primarily on assignments from western clients. (Getty has since scaled back its advertising assignment efforts in China, and James is now represented by Bloc Productions.)

"There's little easy money," says photographer Shannon Fagan, an American photographer in Beijing who is trying to establish himself as a photography consultant to Chinese companies because he doesn't consider shooting opportunities to be plentiful or lucrative enough.

BUT THERE ARE OPPORTUNITIES. Big western ad agencies have set up shop in Beijing and Shanghai. Some creatives at those agencies have experience working outside China, and all of them can see what the rest of the world is doing, so the level of creative sophistication is rising. Choo says Chinese clients turn to foreign photographers if a shoot calls for a unique style or methods that local photographers can't deliver, or if they want to bring cachet to a campaign or brand—and they have the budget to do it.

Mark Cumming, a Honk Kong-based producer, compares it to New York in the 1990s, when agencies were bringing in a lot of British photographers because it was fashionable. "They wanted the newest thing in town, and China wants that as well," he says.

Wilson Chow, an associate executive creative director at Ogilvy & Mather in Beijing, explains that local photographers are perceived as generalists, while foreign photographers are thought of as specialists.

"When a creative is asking for a higher level of execution, both agency and client will look for the specialists. Of course this has much to do with the available budget," he says.

Chow has worked with Zach Gold on campaigns for Motorola and Puma, and with Platon and Dimitri Daniloff on other campaigns in the past. Millet, of Bloc Productions, notes that Chinese clients are most attracted to foreign photographers with big portfolios of celebrity portraiture and ad campaigns for international brands.

BUDGETS ARE WHAT PREVENTS CHINESE CLIENTS from hiring foreign photographers more often. Millett observes that for a U.S. photographer, a shoot in China is a week-long proposition, considering the time lost to travel and jet lag. Fees have to account for that, but Chow says average fees are "much lower" in China than in the U.S. On the bright side, though, he has noticed a rise in assignment fees lately.

Photographers are mostly reticent about actual budget numbers, but Simon Stock says he considers it worth it to shoot in China for half his normal fee. "But it's tough to get that much," he says. James and Fagan report that Chinese clients typically pay foreign photographers $3,500 to $6,000 per day. Assignments can pay more on occasion, Fagan says, but fees usually amount to 30 to 50 percent less than what a photographer would get for a comparable assignment in the U.S. And Chinese clients, he explains, typically don't pay usage fees: They expect unlimited usage rights for at least two years as a condition of the assignment. But that may be changing. Gold says he negotiates usage fees, and Linda Tan, owner of rep firm Red & Raw, says clients in China will pay usage fees to foreign photographers, if pressed.

CONSIDERING THE TROUBLED STATE of assignment photography in the U.S., though, assignments in China may not seem like that bad of a deal. But it is difficult to get a toe hold in China, and by all accounts, the only way to do it is through a local rep.

"You can't do it by phone, you can't do it by Skype," says Fagan. "It has to be face to face" because business is based on personal relationships there, just as it is here. It takes a local rep who knows the ad agencies and the production houses where photo assignments originate. (In addition to hiring photographers directly, ad agencies often outsource that responsibility to production houses in Beijing and Shanghai.)

"If you can get half your normal fee to shoot an assignment in China, "it's worth it," says photographer Simon Stock, "But it's tough to get that much."

Another reason foreign photographers have to work through local reps, though, is because the language, culture, laws, and business practices in China are virtually impossible for foreigners to navigate without help.

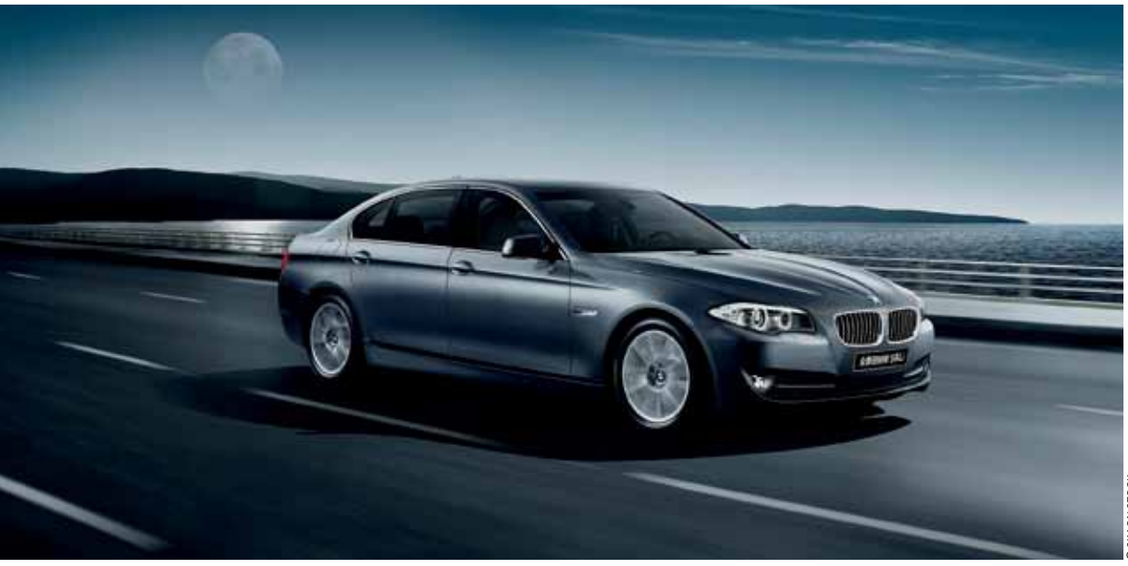
"You have to get international bankers and lawyers to help you," says Bernstein, who explains that it took Bernstein & Andriulli more than a year to establish its office in Beijing.

All the estimating and invoicing has to be done in Chinese. "No Chinese client will work with photographers who issue foreign invoices," says Linda Tan of Red&Raw. The negotiating process, says Mark Cumming, a Hong Kong-based freelance producer, is opaque. You just have to trust the person negotiating for you, he says.

In fact, everything to do with money in China is Byzantine. Clients don't release budgets until the job is done, and then often delay payment for months. But everyone on set expects to be paid in cash, so someone—often the production company—has to float what amounts to a loan for the client. Foreign photographers are simply in no position to manage the budget, and they'd expose themselves to a huge risk of not recouping expenses—or even getting paid—if they tried to go it alone.

"It takes balls of steel" to manage money on a Chinese production, says Cumming. He recounts a story about a TV producer who wasn't paid for a year because a certain stamp was missing from the paperwork. "Everyone knew it was a mistake, but the client said, 'The stamp isn't there, too bad.' They play to local advantage."

Then there's the challenge of getting money out of China when you do get paid. All transactions are in Chinese currency, which is illegal to take out of the country, and foreigners are not allowed to convert it. So a foreign photographer has to find a "fixer" who can convert the money on the black market,



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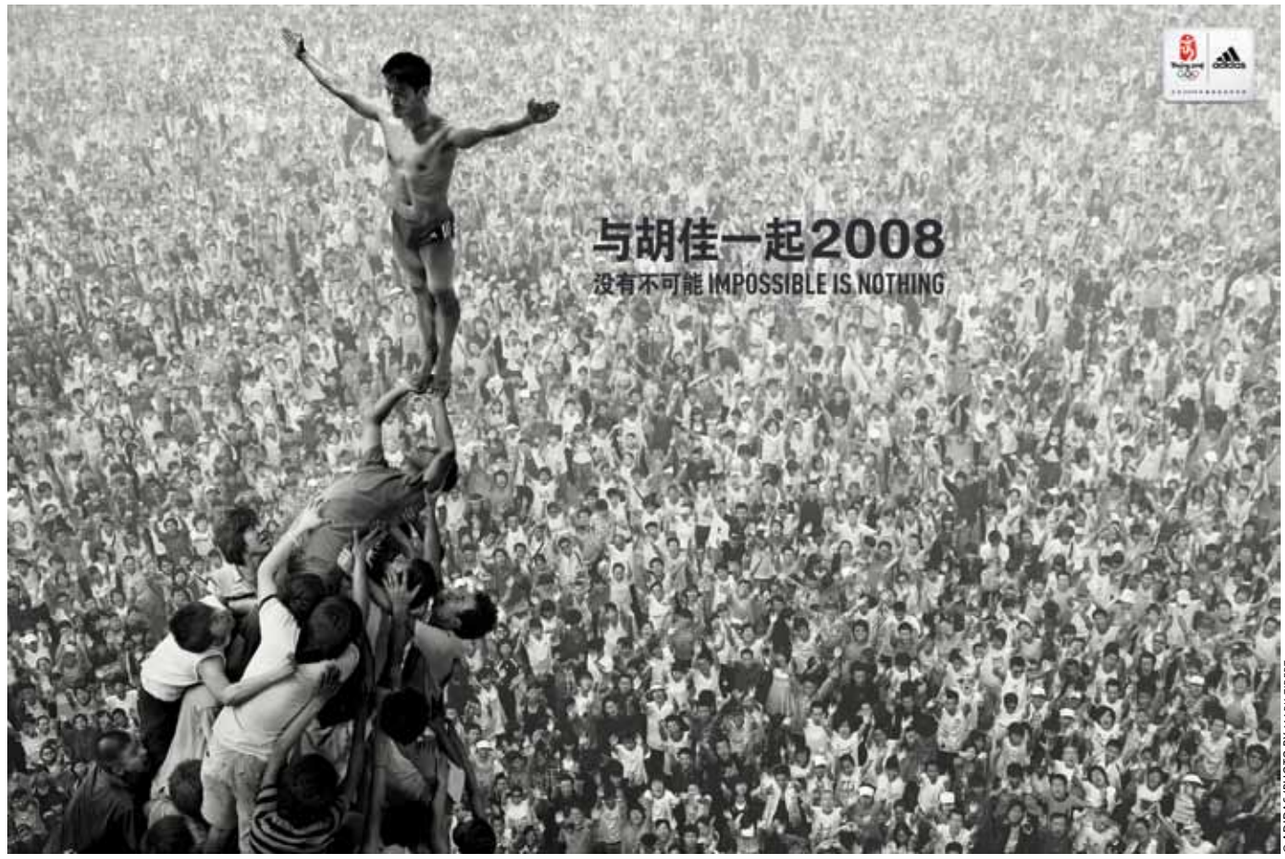

© ADIDAS/PHOTO BY MARK ZIBERT

Opposite page: An ad for BMW, shot by Simon Stock. This page: An ad for Adidas, photographed by Mark Zibert in advance of the Beijing Olympics.

or through an informal banking network (for a percentage). Alternatively, a photographer has to work through a registered office of a foreign company that can legally convert currency and move it out of the country through bank accounts in Hong Kong, for instance. Taxes and conversion fees apply, of course.

THE ACTUAL PRODUCTION presents another set of challenges. "Creatives are inexperienced. Clients don't really know what they want, and there are constant changes," rep Sion Millett says.

"Chinese clients leave everything to last minute. Sometimes I'm not sure if an assignment is even on the night before it's supposed to happen," says James, the British photographer who relocated to Beijing. "Everything's a mad rush, and on set, they ask you for more and more."

Photographers who have to fly into China for jobs usually have to depend on local crews, because budgets aren't high enough to fly in foreign crews. "Right off the bat, there's a language barrier with the crew, so plan on things taking longer," Zibert says.

Gold says that he's struggled in the past with the work ethic of Chinese crews. For one job, he had to paint his own backdrops because he couldn't get a crew to paint them up to the standards he wanted. He and his rep, Sion Millet, sometimes hire TV production crews "because they're more savvy," and more up to the standards of western production, Gold says.

Facilities are also hit or miss. Studios and equipment available for rent locally are "ten or 12 years behind the times," Gold says. In the past he's had to bring pictures of specific pieces of gear he's needed "because they don't have words for it." He also recounts a trip to a rental house for a lighting gel, only to discover just four colors were available.

"It's like it was back in college. You just use what you can get," says Gold, who isn't particularly frustrated by it because he enjoys the challenge.

Choo says that China looks modern and cosmopolitan, but scratch beneath the surface, and you quickly run up against the old China.

"There are only a few good [rental] studios in Beijing and Shanghai," he says. They have the latest brand-name equipment, and big sound stages. But they're in demand and running on tight schedules. And, he says, "production crews definitely don't have the same standards or work ethic as in other countries, but they are catching up fast."

He warns photographers of other vexing problems they may encounter. Talent "might not show up for a shoot just because they missed the bus from their house," he says. Gear is difficult to bring into the country (as Zibert discovered) without the help of a local "to fix the problem for you."

Location permits are also vexing. Choo recounts a shoot last year for BMW, involving a German photographer. He had obtained a permit, but some police arrived, threatening to close down the shoot. "The photographer was in panic mode," says Choo, who had to track down the police officers who issued the permit, and get them to intervene.

"A deal there is not always a deal as we know it here," Cohen says, recounting stories of location permits that ended up costing far more than he was told they would, and instances where clients refused to pay for major job change orders. Even so, he says, "I'm anxious and excited to shoot more there. You just have to tread lightly, and don't expect to make a killing.

Bernstein also cautions that photographers can be easily exploited by unscrupulous reps and producers. And, he says, "There's no guarantee you'll get paid."

But Choo dismisses any suggestions that there's any systematic dishonesty or preying on foreigners. The problem is that foreign photographers come with unrealistic expectations, and a poor understanding of how business works in China.

But he concedes, "The risk is definitely higher in China."

Despite that, plenty of foreign photographers are eager to take their chances, if only they can find a way in. pdn