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**My best shot**

**Interview**

## **Yang Yongliang's best photograph: misty Chinese mountains succumb to the city**

*Interview by Ben Beaumont-Thomas*

**'I am in despair at the rate of urbanisation in China - it's like witnessing someone dying'**



🐦 @ben\_bt

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**I** used to paint traditional landscapes, but I felt the Chinese style had reached an apex - there was no way to progress. I wanted to find a new medium, a more contemporary one that could still capture the spirit of landscape painting. Digital photography seemed to be the answer.

In China, landscape painting is less about describing the real physical world, and more about illustrating a mental state, a spirit - expressing your feelings in each ink stroke. Artists down the generations tend to paint the same landscape in different ways, according to what's in their inner mind. In many ways, this is the opposite to western art. Chinese artists may present multiple perspectives in a single piece. It's about seeing and showing objects beyond how they are.

These artists also try to express eternity. There is no division between morning and night. Shadows are never shown, sunset and sunrise never mentioned. In western art, people tend to depict a moment - the afternoon in a certain season, for example. But Chinese artists tend to portray landscapes as going unchanged throughout time. It has to do with traditional philosophy: life goes round like a circle, coming and going again and again. Whatever happens in one day doesn't matter that much.

With images like this, I make references to traditional painting. First I do a pencil sketch, then I insert photos piece by piece digitally, to create a new landscape. I draw from a large database of pictures I've taken in the last 10 years: planes, railways, whatever. This picture took six months to finish.

Growing up in Shanghai, I was surrounded by lots of traditional architecture - and saw a lot of it removed. China has changed so much, dismantling its heritage in the pursuit of urbanisation. I want to ask questions about these things, about consumerism and how we live today. The rate of change is a major concern. To catch up with western economies, a lot of local customs are being lost - even the way we eat, the way we talk. It is the same with contemporary art. It feels like great traditions are being given up, at least partially, as we switch to the western idea of not only making art, but marketing and selling it.



📷 Photographer  
Yang Yongliang.

I would like to see the government take action - but not much is being done. Maybe they don't really care. I know this process isn't just happening in China, but around the world. So, with these landscapes, I want to raise awareness, rather than give any answer. I don't feel anger - more disappointment and despair. It makes me feel helpless. If you're angry, you take action, but when you just feel disappointed, it's like witnessing someone dying who you can't help.

## **CV**

**Born:** Shanghai, 1980.

**Trained:** China Academy of Art, Hangzhou.

**Influences:** Hiroshi Sugimoto, Bill Viola.

**High point:** “I don’t have one yet.”

**Low point:** “When I don’t know what to do next.”

**Top tip:** “Do whatever you want, be whatever you are.”

● Yang Yongliang is nominated for the 2015 Prix Pictet. The finalists’ show is at National Museum of Modern Art, Paris, 13 November-13 December.