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## If You Look Closely, These Mountains Are Actually a Bustling Metropolis

Yang Yongliang's photo first appears to be pristine mountains in mist. Look a little closer, and you'll see something else entirely.



YANG YONGLIANG



**YANG YONGLIANG'S PHOTO** *From the New World* looks like a breathtaking landscape featuring pristine mountains in the mist. Look a little closer, and you'll see something else entirely.

The scene is actually a collage of hundreds of high rises, apartment buildings and factories from cities across China. Steely skyscrapers dominate the landscape, with scaffolding and cranes taking the place of elegant bamboo and gnarly pine trees. For Yongliang, it's a dystopian vision of China's future. "This is the artificial yet realistic world we live in," he says. "[Industrial features] are actually replacing the natural features in our lives."

The image is an exaggerated metaphor for China's rapid urbanization. The country's built hundreds of new cities in the past 30 years and now has the largest construction market in the world, the sector accounting for about a quarter of China's economy. In 2014, China built more skyscrapers than any other country, and in 2015 completed Shanghai Tower, the second tallest skyscraper in the world.


Yongliang grew up in Shanghai in the 1980s, and witnessed the construction boom firsthand. Yet he also developed a deep love of nature, studying traditional Chinese landscape painting at a young age. Yongliang was particularly inspired by the Song Dynasty painters and their idyllic depiction of rivers, trees and ethereal mountains drifting into the distance. This passion later fueled his art and in 2005, Yongliang began experimenting with photography to make sense of his changing environment.

He visits construction sites in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Taipei, taking black-and-white pictures of the equipment and buildings he encountered. Later, Yongliang organizes them into categories—cement, cables, telephone poles and more. After eleven years of shooting, his digital archive is more than two terabytes. He uses it to create sweeping landscapes, layering hundreds of images to build peaks and valleys evocative of the old master paintings.

It took Yongliang six months to complete *\*From the New World\** in 2014, the final image a whopping 13 feet high by 26 feet wide. The photo has all the majesty and grandiosity of traditional Chinese landscapes. But far from creating a sense of calm, it's strangely disconcerting. For Yongliang, it conveys exactly how he feels about China's never-ending construction. "Traditional landscape painters used to paint nature scenes to express their inner world," he says. "I follow them, however, our nature scenes are quite different from the ancient ones."



Laura Mallonee is a writer for WIRED covering photography.

CONTRIBUTOR   

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