



Through the Lens of an Architect

Tugo Cheng

An architect by trade, amateur photographer Tugo Cheng simply cannot conceal his excitement at the sheer mention of photography. In fact, what began as a hobby alongside his backpacking trips has now won him multiple awards including National Geographic Photo Contest and Sony World Photography Awards.

The Elements of Style... in Photography

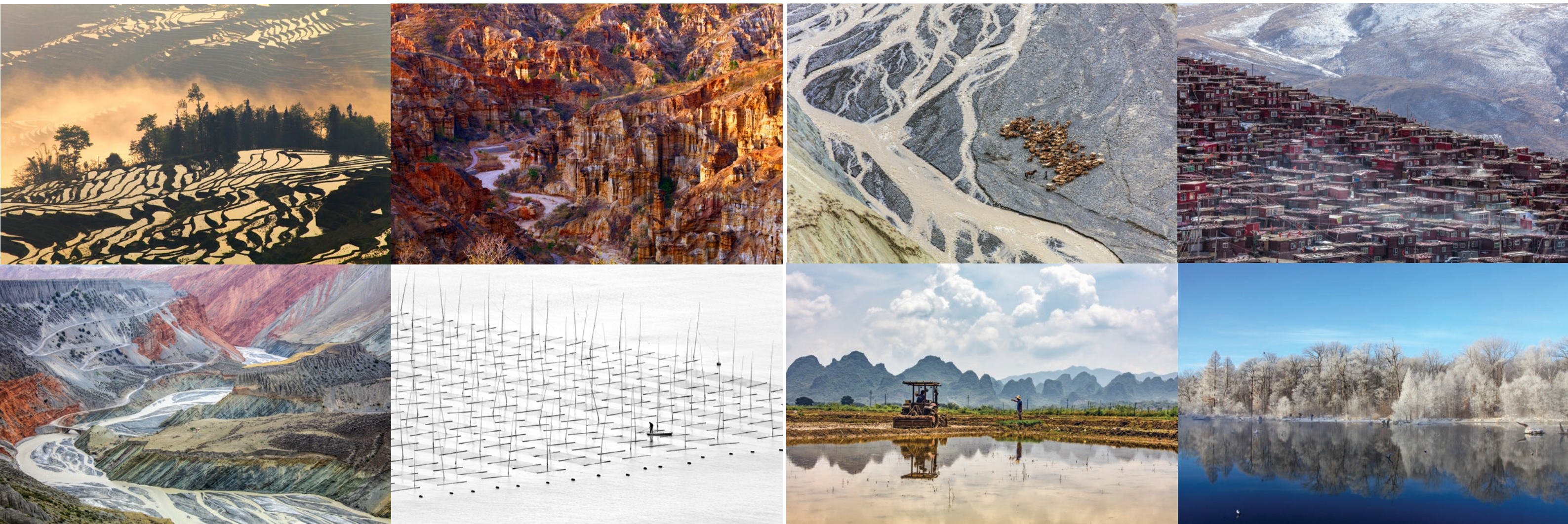
Tugo developed a sharper eye for aesthetics from professional training in architecture is hardly surprising, though he believes being an architect has given his photographer self so much more, namely creativity and imagination. “Visual aesthetics are essential in photography, but more importantly creativity and originality. It’s all about shooting outside the box. Don’t just do the typical postcard shot that everyone else does. Photography is a form of exploration, so even at the same location, you’re bound to find new perspective.”

Tugo’s passion in landscape photography owes partly to his obsession with patterns in nature. Flicking through his portfolio will see a plenitude of architectural lines, glorious geometry and meticulous symmetry. “I love doing landscape photography through an artistic approach,” he remarks. “By adding human elements into abstract patterns, the image will have a sense of scale and proportion...It’s a blur between illusion and reality.”

The Untouched Beauty of Chinese Landscapes

Many of his works feature remote areas of China, which he has been photographing since he went on an exchange program to Tsinghua University while completing his master’s degree. “China has a lot of fascinating geographic phenomena that have accidentally come about because people want to make a living. Take terraced paddy fields and tea farms for examples, where mountains have been cut into steps for effective agriculture...Or Fujian’s aquaculture farm, where rows and rows of bamboo rods form interesting patterns. “While we are shaping our nature for food and we create beautiful compositions unintentionally ”

“I want to show the world the unknown China” is Tugo’s response when asked why his works are predominantly of Chinese natural landscapes. “China is changing rapidly, yet there’s a lack of balance between development and conservation. So if you don’t go now, those places may either lose its charm by becoming commercial tourist attractions, or they may look completely different a few years from now due to inadequate protection.” Despite being faced with the dilemma that revealing these hidden gems may risk damages caused by tourism, he ultimately believes that making these landscapes known to a global audience may urge the government to systematically protect these natural sites. “Adequate protection and better civic education are crucial to conserving these landscapes in China and photography has a role.”



Shoot Outside the Box

Both of Tugo's most well-known works were shot in China. One is of Tian Shan, the largest mountain ranges in Central Asia, and the other, titled *Farming the Sea*, captures aquaculture in Fujian. Despite the stark contrast in colour, both images have an abstract finish not unlike paintings. "I like them both for different reasons: Tian Shan's for its unusual colour composition, and *Farming the Sea* for its sharp lines. Despite being on two ends of the spectrum, one turned out looking like an oil painting, and the other a line drawing." Then Tugo sheds us a little secret: both images were taken on a cloudy day. "The Fujian location is known for shooting sunsets, and I got plenty of those "images" on the first day I was there, but those were not what I had wanted," he recalls. "Then it started raining on the second day, the cloudiness reduced the shadows drastically. What was left were the simple lines of the bamboo rods, giving the image a graphic quality." Much like *Farming the Sea*, the award-winning photo of Tian Shan was also shot during overcast weather, where the many colourful plateaus and canyons were flattened to a single layer in this surrealist image.

"Don't stay indoors or give up just because it is not a sunny day. You can create beautiful photos even on cloudy days or when it's pouring rain. Don't let the weather be your decision maker; use your creativity to tackle different environments and conditions." his advice for photography beginners. When asked about photographic ambitions he has yet to achieve, Tugo responds with a smile. "To photograph more extreme landscapes, such as the glaciers in the West of China. At an average elevation of 5,000 metres, I will definitely need adequate physical training before taking on this challenge. It's an ultimate goal and challenge not just for my photography but also my body and mind."

What's Next

October is a big month for Tugo, as he has a book launch and a solo exhibition at Harbour City's Gallery by the Harbour from October 19 to November 1. The upcoming Wheelock Photography Competition, with its theme being Kowloon East, has also invited Tugo to be one of the judges. "Kowloon East district has seen a lot of rapid changes lately. Contestants can pay attention to things that signify these transformations," he suggests. "The area is essentially a microcosm of Hong Kong, making it perfect for any kind of photography – street, nature, portraits or architecture... there is never a shortage of characters that encapsulate the essence of the city."

To take it a step further, Tugo is trying to partner up with various organisations to host photo tours in hopes of showing people how to shoot beautiful architecture while learning about the history of architecture of Hong Kong in a systematic approach. "From old tenement houses to public housing in the 50's and beyond, there are so much history and interesting stories behind the different architectural designs. It's not just about framing a pretty picture; understanding the subject you are photographing is also very important. Photography and architecture are good starting points to tell the story of Hong Kong."

