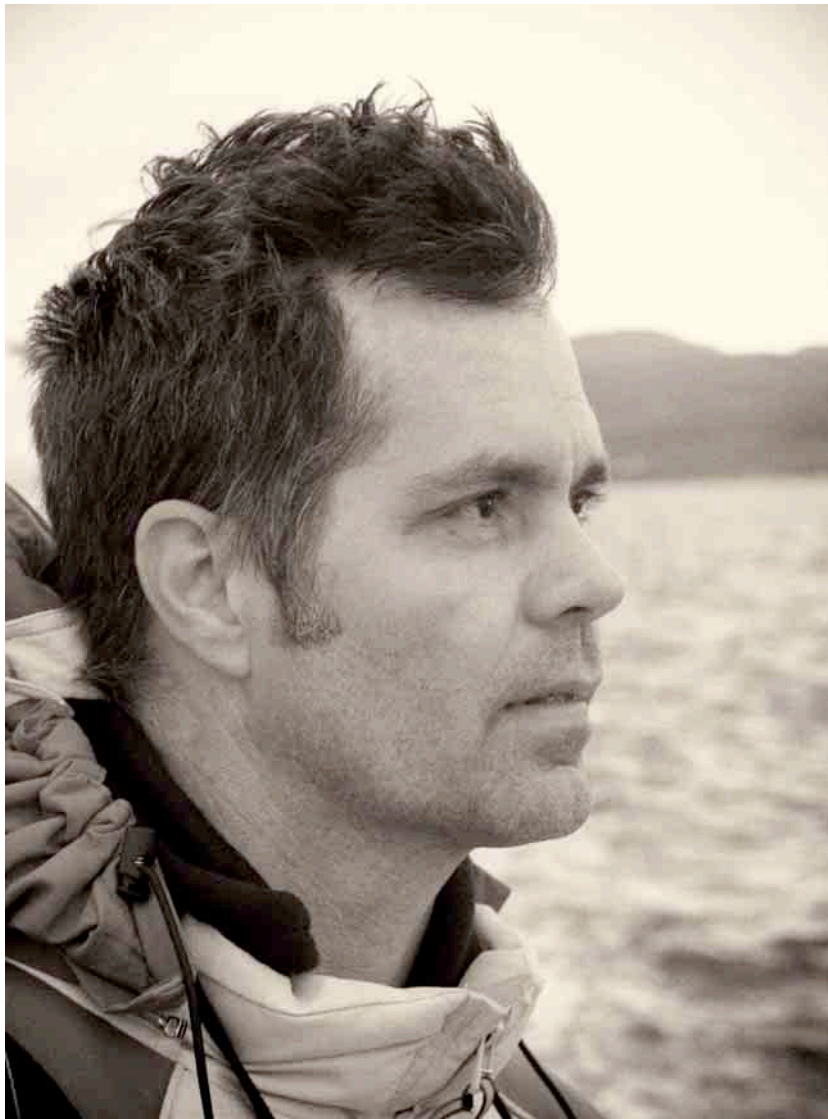


Andre Eichman

The photographer talks to **Yvonne Lai** about globe-trotting and travelling the mainland with Mao Zedong.



ME AND MY MAO 'The Chairman and I' started as a light-hearted project in Shanghai in 2003. I wanted a side project, something that I could take along that was easy and fun. It's a pretty simple project, there's not much to it. I wandered around China with a Chairman Mao statue [taking photos of people holding it].

Some of the portraits work better than others; but the idea is like the opening of [Federico Fellini's] *La Dolce Vita*, where they fly a giant statue of Jesus across Rome and get the reaction of every class of people – the rich, the poor, the kid on the street, workers. I just wanted to see what people did when I handed them a statue of Chairman Mao.

Some would laugh or smile, others would say, 'I don't want to hold it'. Sure, the Communist Party doesn't look anything like it did back in the day but the influences still echo around.

Picture: Vicky Baker

You can't deny that he's had an effect on just about everyone who lives in China.

SAVED BY THE BELLE After I met Comrade Gu Ping [through my dad, who was teaching in a medical college in Gansu province], I began taking 'The Chairman and I' project more seriously, with a lot more respect. Gu was Zhou Enlai's wife's bodyguard during the Long March. He told me some stories that still make the hair on the back of my head stand on end. Madame Zhou had dysentery a lot of the time and Gu basically had to carry her during the retreat. About three quarters of the way up some snowy mountains, he couldn't breathe, he was completely soaked and freezing. He sat down in the snow like many other people, although most of them never got up again. Madame Zhou came back on horseback and gave him some chilli and ginger to get his circulation going, and [told him to] hold on to the horse's tail and not let go of it till he reached the top of that mountain. So she saved his life, is what he reckons.

Gu wrote a poem for me that was almost prophetic, which translates: "The wind has blown you here, so I have received you." That's how this project has worked, whenever I'm off track, somebody else comes along and puts me back on. I've never had a project flow as easily as this one. The right people get involved; I feel guided.

RAISED WITH ITCHY FEET I was born in Utah [in the United States], where my dad had his first gig as a psychiatrist.

I'm the youngest of the family. My twin brother was born two hours earlier than me. We ended up being written up in the medical journals because I turned around in my mom's uterus and didn't want to come out. My brother, Ruick, was born through natural childbirth, but I had to come out through Caesarean section.

Not too long after that, we moved to Hawaii. My first cognitive memory is of sailing in Waikiki Bay with my dad – I remember the colourful sail of the boat and the blue sky.

When my parents got divorced, I [along with my two sisters and brother] moved to California with my mom. When I was 11 or 12 years old, my mother got cancer and died. It was heartbreaking for me.

We moved to Germany to live with my dad, who was practicing in Wurzburg, a couple of hours outside of Frankfurt.

During the Korean war, my dad had been a medic, but he also documented a lot of what he saw; he's quite handy with the camera.

SNAP DECISIONS In San Diego, I was in college to do fine art then switched to photography.

Initially, I picked up the camera because I wasn't very quick at sketching, so I would photograph a scene [as a painting] reference. I started to enjoy the moment. So the work in the dark room became a big part of what I was doing.

The photographers I admired were [Henri] Cartier-Bresson, Andre Kertesz and Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein of the Farm Security Administration, who documented Oklahoma dust-bowl farmers whose farms were taken from them. They documented a changing America; the migration during the 1930s Depression. *Grapes of Wrath* is a great book that talks all about it.

I wasn't too interested in grad school. I wanted to get out there and document. I was of the mind that things were disappearing quickly and I wanted to get to them before they did. So I started travelling a lot because I wanted something a bit rawer than what I was getting in America. For my first projects [out of college], in 1984, I went back to Europe and travelled around. After that I travelled to Guatemala, where I did mostly colour photography of the people.

FASHION AND ASIA In 1987, I decided I was going to Australia. I flew through Bangkok – and was only going to be there for a stopover. I ended up being there for six years. Thailand had everything I wanted. Everywhere you looked was a great photograph just waiting to be taken.

To support myself, I started doing fashion photography, which I had done bits and pieces of when I was in the US, mostly head shots for models. It took off quickly for me so for a while I was [travelling between] Thailand, Singapore, Paris and London. I wasn't the best self-promoter but somehow my name got out and I always had work.

I moved to Hong Kong in order to be closer to China in 1993. My first taste of China was with the *South China Morning Post*, for Operation Smile in Kunming, Yunnan province, in 1994. Since then, I've done a lot of freelance work in the mainland, mostly documenting disappearing cultures.



'The Chairman and I' photo series will be on display from today until October 18 (between 10am and 12pm, and 3pm and 5pm) at the Foreign Correspondents' Club, 2 Lower Albert Road, Central. Visit www.chairmanandi.com for more details. To see an interview with Andre Eichman and a sneak peak at his photos, go to www.scmp.com/video.