

Forest

Dr Yan Wang Preston

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# Project Description

*Forest* is a photographic investigation of the complexities and politics of nature restoration projects in two new Chinese cities. Using repeat photography and visual storytelling as its key methodologies, the project followed the developments of transplanted old trees in their new urban setting before documenting some questionable ecology recovery landscapes. The primary output is an edited sequence of sixty-five images with accompanying text in the format of a photo book, forming an emotional as well as intellectual discussion on the complex conditions of nature, the urban environment and the new homeland within it.

**Project Duration:**

2014-2018

**Completion Date:**

10 May 2018 (book launch date)

**Funder:**

Syngenta Photography Award, 2017. After early stages of experiments made since 2010, sample images and the project proposal won the First Prize, Professional Commission of the internationally juried Syngenta Photography Award. The Award granted £50K for the project completion and the book production.

# Research Aims & Objectives

## Research Aims:

Through the making of photographs and the publication of an edited photo narrative:

- To investigate the complexities and politics of nature restoration projects in China beginning from the question: what is the nature of nature in contemporary Chinese cities?
- To critically reflect on the conditions of urban homeland in relation to urban nature.

## Research Objectives:

- Through embodied experiences and photographic experimentation, to locate under-explored yet important subjects within the seemingly overwhelming and frequently documented urban landscapes of China.
- To develop effective aesthetic strategies and photographic methods as the foundation of a long term, critical yet accessible investigation.
- To develop visual narrative methods for exploring the complexity, rather than the negativity, of constructed urban nature and the conditions of urban home.



Plate 2: Yan Wang Preston, 'Central Park, University City, Chongqing, China, 2011'.  
*Forest series (2010-2017)*

# Research Narrative

China's rapid urbanisation has drawn considerable attention from domestic and international artists and researchers.

Photographically, most projects have emphasised the visual density of urban construction and its negative effect on traditional life styles and existing ecologies. The fact that China is also a leading country in nature restoration in both rural and urban environments is rarely critically explored. The complexity of nature restoration within the city has received almost no attention. Typically, the new urban environment is placed in binary against the idea of a 'homeland'<sup>1</sup> or 'nature'.

Through an extended critical observation of nature restoration projects in two Chinese cities, *Forest* addresses this under-explored area by questioning its positive public image and by making its multi-layered implications evident. Through experimentation and editing, the primary research method, long-term observation through repeat photography, focused on the particular subject of transplanted old trees. Contextual research and investigative methods to trace the origins of the trees were employed. Critical reflection upon the collected materials, including experiences, photographs and non-visual information, generated new insights. The nature of nature in contemporary Chinese cities, in a particular sense, references the politics of the constructed nature in new urban China. The landscapes photographed reflect the ideology of a rapid economic growth in which the old trees function more as political monuments and commodities than nature itself. The long-term observation also enabled the researcher to discover the potential adaptability of an urban landscape with a brutal beginning of transplantation, displacement and migration. Given time, such landscapes can evolve into a new urban homeland.

This conclusion is narrated through the primary research output: a photo book titled as *Forest*, sequenced in chapters with an approximate chronological order, enriched with considerations of colour, mood, scale and storyline. The book is a visual and intellectual articulation of the complexities of urban re-naturing projects, their ideologies of urbanism and capitalism, and their embedded environmental damage. The book also demonstrates

such projects' positive contribution towards making the new cities into a livable homeland. *Forest* therefore contributes towards the photographic, cultural geographic and architectural discourse around urban nature, the city and urbanisation, displacement, sustainability and urban ecology.

1. Notable works have been made by artists including Edward Burtynsky, Nadav Kander, Michael Wolf, Peter Bialobrzeski, Zhuang Hui, Yan Changjiang and Zhang Kechun.

# Research Context

Global environmental change, predominantly understood in terms of environmental degradation, ecological crisis and climate change, has drawn much attention from researchers in diverse disciplines: environmental scientists, urban planners, architects, cultural geographers and artists. To counterbalance our negative impact upon the environment, actions in conservation, ecology restoration, reforestation and rewilding are gaining momentum in many countries from western Europe to China. Although promoted as positive acts, such projects, often on a large-scale, involve disturbing existing environments and embody the politics and ideology of the biosphere.

With a national policy of developing an eco-civilisation, China is one of the leading countries in rapid urbanisation and nature restoration projects.<sup>2</sup> Because such processes are designed to happen simultaneously they are an ideal ground for exploring the complexities of constructed urban nature through such questions as: What are the ideals, myths and politics that encourage and sustain ecology restoration projects, particularly when embedded within the dominant ideologies of urbanism and the market economy? What are their long-term effects and implications? How might we understand their complexities through the making of photographs? How can we understand the idea and physicality of a restored nature and our relationship to it within an urban environment? The modernist binary view of nature and culture are no longer adequate for understanding contemporary nature. Renaturing projects enable an alternative and less-polarising understanding of urban nature, landscape and ecology, and their complexity is yet to be investigated in depth by researchers and artists.

Contemporary landscape photography has played an important role in critical explorations of the urban environment and its related environmental, ecological and socio-political issues. Developing from the unromanticised views of human-altered landscapes pioneered by the influential New Topographic<sup>3</sup> movements in the 1970s, it is promoted by some of the most influential photographic awards such as the Prix Pictet Award with its theme of sustainability, and

the recently discontinued Syngenta Photography Award exploring global challenges. Leading landscape photographers, including Edward Burtynsky, Michael Wolf, Yang Yongliang, Olaf Otto Becker, Mitch Epstein, Richard Misrach and Mandy Barker have contributed significantly to raising public awareness of the scale and depth of human-caused environmental degradation. Photography has not yet investigated in-depth the current movement of ecological reconstruction, often termed 're-naturalisation', 'rewilding' and 'ecology recovery'. And this research demonstrates how and what photography can contribute to the critical understanding of such movements.

2. China's formally implemented a central policy of promoting a green, circular and low-carbon development at the 18th Party Congress in 2012, after experiments in selected regions.

3. The movement was established by the 1975 exhibition 'New Topographics - Photographs of A Man-Altered Landscape', held at the International Museum of Photography in Rochester, New York.

# Research Methods & Process

This project involved the critical observation and photographing of chosen city landscapes over an extended period, with some sites re-photographed several times. Repeat photography is a powerful tool to eliminate the photographer's prejudice, since the unfolding of developments is out of the photographer's control (Ref 3).

Initially the project was led by the researcher's emotional response towards specific elements in the landscape: transplanted old trees, concrete buildings and city crowds. Such landscape was constructed under an ideology of urbanism and a policy of 'greening the city'. Promoted as an ideal homeland, the city, with its overwhelming signs of destruction, discontinuity and displacement, appeared to be a concrete wasteland when just constructed. And these contradictions were of critical interest for the research at this stage.

First-hand contextual research was carried out through informal conversations with city dwellers, tree transplanters, local journalists and environmentalists. News reporting and governmental websites provided context from the perspective of national policy and 'greening' practices in other cities. Theoretical research helped to place the research within wider international discourse on nature, urban nature, and the complexity of ecological practices. Such contextual research and critical reflection upon the photographs made-to-date helped narrowing down the subject matter to transplanted mature trees, which come with rich cultural and



Ref 3: Yan Wang Preston, 'Longan Woodland' Triptych, 2011, 2013, 2017'.  
*Forest series (2010-2017)*

Ref 4: Yan Wang Preston, 'Frank' Triptych, March 2013, June 2013, November 2017.  
*Forest series (2010-2017)*

symbolic meanings, prompting an in-depth investigation of the politics of tree transplantation and the long-term outlook for the city.

One individual 300-year-old tree's transplant journey provided crucial information on the complexity of urban re-naturing projects in China (Ref 4). It also became a turning point for the research: rather than focusing on the city as a sign of dystopia, a space between utopia and dystopia and how urban nature is connected to the idea of home became central. Consequently trees, the city and its crowds were again observed, but rather than separately, the elements were now photographed composed in the same frames (Plate 3). The images were thus less emotional but more observational. The city was observed as a possible new home, with its defects but also affects, and from the construction of woodland in major cities, the research now also investigated the making of the landscape in the name of ecological recovery in a small, yet-to-be-built town.

The project was completed by constructing a narrative with selected photographs made throughout the duration of the research. The resulting sequence, together with captions and other text, was materialised as a monograph photo book titled as 'Forest', published by Hatje Cantz in May 2018. A series of related international exhibitions have also been staged.



Ref 5: Yan Wang Preston, 'Chongqing 2011'. A test image produced during the experimentation stage of *Forest* project. The image was excluded from the final sequence since it places too much emphasis on the overwhelming intensity of the city landscape, which is already documented by other artists.



Ref 6: Yan Wang Preston, 'A tree at night, 2013'. A test image produced during the experimentation stage of *Forest* project. The image was excluded from the final sequence since it is too closely associated with death in its potential symbolic meaning, therefore lack of subtlety or complexity.



Plate 3: Yan Wang Preston, 'Egongyan Park, Chongqing, China, 2017'.  
*Forest* series (2010-2017)



# Research Outcomes & Dissemination

The research highlights the problematic aspects of the ideological inspirations and practical realisation of urban renaturing projects. Despite being promoted (by the government and private developers) and perceived (by the general public) as being completely ecologically beneficial, large-scale urban reforestation and ecology-recovery projects in China almost unavoidably build on the destruction or disruption of existing ecologies elsewhere and in the city itself. Subject to the mechanisms of a capitalist market system, nature in this context becomes a trophy for the public sector to satisfy a political agenda of developing China into an eco-civilisation without sufficient consideration of ecology, and the environmental cost and sustainability of such projects are seriously questionable.

Despite the brutal displacement of trees and people at the beginning of making a new city, the collaged elements in the city integrate people and nature as they adapt to a new type of inter-dependence in a socio-ecological society. The city has become greener and a more pleasant homeland for its new dwellers over the observation period. The complexities inherent in constructed urban nature are rarely addressed in existing photographic projects on urban landscape and urbanisation. This project contributes a pictorial thesis on such complexities without judgement on whether such urban renaturing is entirely negative or positive, and the book adopts a narrative strategy accessible to the wider public as well as to artistic, environmental and intellectual audiences.

# Forest Book

**Title:** Forest (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2018)

**ISBN:** 978-3-7757-4375-4 (EN)

**Texts:** Zelda Cheatle and Nadine Barth

128 pages, 65 Plates, 30 x 26 cm, hardcover

**Print Run:** 2,500



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**Forest Solo Exhibitions:**

2019	Forest	LOOK Biennial, Liverpool, UK
	Forest	Side Gallery, Newcastle, UK
	Forest	Cortona on the Move Photography Festival, Italy
2018	Forest	Gibson Mill, Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire, UK
	Forest	Xposure Photography Festival, Sharjah City, UAE
2017	Forest	GETXOPHOTO, Getxo, Spain

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**Group Exhibitions featuring Forest:**

2020	Ten by Ten	Fotofest Biennial 2020, Houston, Texas, USA
	Pier to Pier	Shanghai Xiang Cheng Centre of Photography, Shanghai, China
2019	Sony World Photography Awards (touring exhibition)	Somerset House, London, UK Sony Ginza Park, Tokyo, Japan Monza, Viale Brianza, Italy
	Pier to Pier	LOOK Biennial, Liverpool, UK
	Our Happy Life: Architecture and Well-Being in the Age of Emotional Capitalism	Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal, Canada
2018	Family of No Man	The Rencontres d'Arles, France
2017	Parallel 2017	C-Art Centre, Chongqing, China
	Syngenta Photography Award	Somerset House, London, UK
	Syngenta Photography Award	Saraceni House, Bologna, Italy

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**Awards:**

2019	1st Prize, Professional Landscape Category	Sony World Photography Awards
2017	1st Prize, Professional Landscape Category	Syngenta Photography Award

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**Conference Presentation:**

Paper title: Vision of Entanglement: On Forest, at the Society of Photographic Education annual conference 2020, Houston, Texas, USA, 2020

Paper title: The Golden Tree: On the nature of nature in contemporary Chinese cities At the 'Urban Transformations and Contemporary Art in China' conference, Tate Liverpool, 2019.

Organiser: Centre for Chinese Visual Arts (CCVA), Birmingham City University.

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**Selected Reviews:**

Thomas, D, On Forest, in International Journal of Photography, 1st issue, to be released in April 2020.

Brown, C, Forest, on Photomonitor, Dec 2018  
(<https://www.photomonitor.co.uk/forest/>)

Meier, A, A Photographer Follows the Urban Migration of China's Rural Trees, on Hyperallergic, 3 Aug 2018.  
(<https://hyperallergic.com/453379/a-photographer-follows-the-urban-migration-of-chinas-rural-trees/>)

Zimmermann, D, Yan Wang Preston Forest, in PHOTONEWS ZEITUNG FÜR FOTOGRAFIE, Jul-Aug 2018 (ISSN 1612-4413)

Brauchitsch, B, My Friend, the Tree, in European Photography, Nr 203, Summer 2018 (ISSN 0172-7028)

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**Selected Public Media Coverage:**

Guardian Eyewitness, 13 August 2018 (Printed)

Guardian Cities, Uprooted: old tree transplants for China's new cities - in pictures, 27 August 2018 (Online)  
(<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/gallery/2018/aug/27/uprooted-old-tree-transplants-for-chinas-new-cities-in-pictures>)



Ref 8: Forest solo exhibition at Xposure Photography Festival, Sharjah, UAE, 2018



Ref 9: Forest solo exhibition at Birkenhead Priory, Wirral, Liverpool, UK, 2019



Ref 10: Forest in Peer to Peer exhibition, Shanghai Center of Photography, China, 2020

# Bibliography

## Books:

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Galassi, P., Andreas Gursky  
(New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2001)

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(Huntingdon: Gateway, 2015)

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the Photographs of Edward Burtynsky  
(Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada in association  
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Roberts Adams. Lewis Baltz. Bernd and Hilla  
Becher. Joe Deal. Frank Gohlke. Nicholas Nixon.  
John Schott. Stephen Shore. Henry Wessel, Jr.  
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Intercalations 4 (Berlin: K. Verlag, 2017)

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(Göttingen: Steidl, 2011)

Wolf, M., Michael Wolf - Architecture of Density  
(Berlin: Peperoni Books; 3rd Edition, 2012)

## Journals Articles:

Gandy, M.(2018) Cities in deep time, City, 22:1,  
96-105, DOI:10.1080/13604813.2018.1434289

Gandy, M. (2016) Unintentional landscapes,  
Landscape Research, 41:4,433-440,  
DOI: 10.1080/01426397.2016.1156069

## Websites:

[www.prixpictet.com](http://www.prixpictet.com)

[www.syngentaphoto.com](http://www.syngentaphoto.com)

**Output Type:**

Scholarly book, original artistic works, creative body of enquiry, solo exhibition, contribution to collaborative group exhibitions, journal articles, conference contribution