

Pingyao 2023:

A Conversation with Rob and Nadia

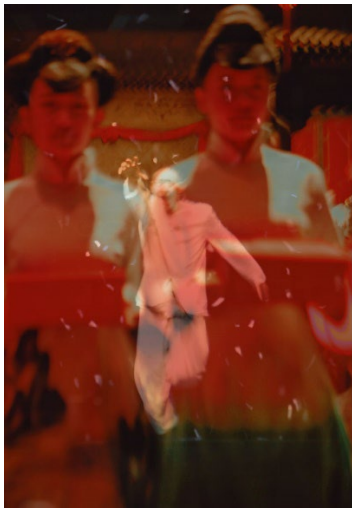


Image from Pingyao Workshops, 2023

In early 2023, I was invited to propose submissions from Canada for the 23rd annual Pingyao International Photography Festival in China. In addition to curating work for exhibition that September, I also wanted to include a component that would reference the craft of teaching photography: how thinking can inform making, and how the setting of challenges can lead to unexpected results.

Rob Davidson's **The Photo Workshop**, which he set up as a forum for photographers during the long months of Covid, seemed like an ideal example. Rob and his partner Nadia Cheema were willing to travel to Pingyao and share work produced by Workshop participants; while there, they both lectured and led workshops to share the underlying ideas that had proven so stimulating for participants in Canada.

Rob's online seminars had proven astonishingly productive. By the time their work was gathered, selected and sent to Pingyao, each participant had an extensive and varied portfolio, and Rob had prepared both a full exhibition and a book, *Making & Thinking: The Idea of a Photo Workshop*. The conversation that follows is excerpted from Rob's writing about the goals of the Workshop, and from later discussions with Rob and Nadia about their experiences in China.

From Rob's writings: *When the world went into lockdown and in-person classes were suspended, I realized my students would still need to continue developing their photography skills and their understanding of the medium. I felt the best way to accomplish this would be to create challenges that would expand boundaries and encourage them to explore new ways to create imagery.*

As the workshop began, assignments were mostly related to technical issues or to selection of subject matter; however, I soon came to see that students needed more conceptual and artistic challenges. I began presenting stylistic approaches such as Pictorialism, Street Photography, Minimalism, or Conceptual Portraiture. I would present the historical context, artistic intention and working techniques of these approaches, along with examples and reference materials.

Students would challenge themselves to create new photographs reflecting these styles and approaches, using their new understanding to inform and expand their creative endeavors.

There was often initial resistance or reluctance to undertake a new and sometimes uncomfortable approach to photography, but the workshop participants soon learned that the challenges pushed them to new, and often surprising, discoveries about their practice and their artistic abilities.

Discussion with Nadia & Rob: *Photographic education in China works very differently—students there are encouraged to find the “right” way to solve a photographic problem. We found the same mixture of hesitation and curiosity in the students we met in Pingyao and Nanjing, along with a real desire to understand what we were trying to do with our approach to image-making.*

More on that below, but since you asked about what we found in Pingyao, let's start with the festival itself. It was huge—way bigger than CONTACT in Toronto—and try as we might, we weren't able to see everything. They talked about nearly fourteen thousand photographs displayed throughout the ancient city, and later press releases put the number at 13,961. We'd never seen anything like it.

Not only was the festival massive, the entire culture of photography in China is very passionate: it's normal for them to be photographing all the time, taking pictures of everything—even taking pictures of the pictures in the exhibition! Many, many people were carrying more than one camera, often with big lenses, tripods, everything, plus cell phones for selfies... I think all this activity is partly cultural, but partly it was made possible by the rapid growth of a newly prosperous middle class in China. And the exhibition took place just prior to a national week of holidays, so people came from all over the country. There were not many westerners, but the crowds from China were really impressive. I'd say 96% of the people we saw had cameras, and many had drones as well; sometimes these were like locusts, buzzing everywhere.

Everyone there shares their photos—literally, all the time--via WeChat, which has social media and image-sharing built right in. Chinese photographers were eager to share, not so much to compete with each other as simply to improve their own work; we found this quite interesting. They did have a big awards ceremony at the end, to be sure, but in general the culture was one of sharing rather than competing.

While the overall level of activity was staggering, at the same time, both photographers and curators took care not to display or distribute images that would be deemed upsetting to others... I remember one set of images that didn't get displayed because it was deemed “too haunting”! There is a tacit acknowledgement that the government does not want certain things to be put out there. Yet at the same time, we found many levels of expressiveness in the work we saw, as if photographers had found a way to work within the limitations of the situation, or steer around certain issues a little bit. If you avoid doing things that are overtly offensive, you can do pretty much what you want.

We found many parallels in Chinese photography to photography in the west, but these had developed of their own accord rather than out of direct exposure to North American or European work. So there was a lot of curiosity about photography in Canada, a lot of openness despite the many cultural changes that have occurred in China, usually imposed from above. The Chinese seem very adaptable to huge changes in the cultural landscape, particularly in the more prosperous eastern half of the country.

The workshops we led were very interesting. Their passion for photography made all participants very open to what we were presenting, yet we also found when using language about certain metaphorical or expressive issues, the translators often had to pause. Sometimes they would utilize several sentences to best convey the sense of a single word, or to unpack our ideas about engaging more fully with emotional, sometimes hidden, aspects of a photograph.

Even so, the student work we saw was often both heartfelt and revealing. And students were certainly willing to re-work an image to make it more expressive. At first the responses in the workshops tended to be literal and subject-driven; we had to push them a bit to explore how they actually felt about what they were doing. But once we could reach them on that level, it was like opening the floodgates, and the work they started to bring in—sometimes the very next day—was correspondingly more expressive. They started to explore, rather than simply copy, or just work on technique. And at the University of Nanjing, after we gave a presentation, the faculty weighed in, almost giving the students pep talks about the value of what we were trying to encourage them to do.

Some of the exhibits we saw did emphasize the importance of expression for its own sake, such as the “Female Eye” exhibition, which was small but highly curated and very effective, very sophisticated and mature. One photographer utilized the idea of the Chinese scroll, with long, strikingly vertical images, and another explored some of the ideas about death in the natural world that you can find in certain of Sally Mann’s landscape works. And at another exhibition, this time in Nanjing, we saw an exceptional series of platinum prints, photographs about the different landscapes along train routes, and what you could experience while riding the trains in China—these were gorgeous. There was some analog work that we saw, but the emphasis was certainly on digital, and at Nanjing University both the students and the faculty were very proud of what they had been able to do with digital printing technology—even learning how to print on rice paper. The work ethic is incredibly strong, and this does lead to various kinds of innovation and exploration.

In the workshops we would start by giving the students a challenge, and seeing what they came up with. The turnaround time was extremely short, but even between the first and the second critiques, we could always see ideas taking hold, and the work starting to change. Even though we had to work incredibly quickly, the students always stayed right with us and explored the challenges we put in front of them. Whatever the focus—minimalism, pictorialism, personal narrative, expressionism, to name just a few—they always came back with something interesting, as soon as they were able to get past the idea of doing something in a certain, correct way. We showed them a lot of work. Just to give some idea: Rosamund Purcell and Olivia Parker, Florence Henri, Irving Penn, and of course we shared images from our Photo Workshop students.

It was amazing how they responded to our feedback; so much of what they were getting from the educational system there has to do with technique first and foremost. You know—can you improve the composition, can you frame this idea better, can you make a better print? We tried to get into the work in a whole different way, starting with the idea that they should make images that came from their own experiences of life, not from the desire to correctly complete an assignment.

We really tried to give them permission to explore their own emotional range, to give them the opportunity to do something that was purely personally motivated and personally meaningful—we stayed away from specific technical challenges, and there were no restrictions or quantitative

criteria. We never said to give us X number of images on this theme, or to print them at a certain size. It was exhausting at times, and at other times it was really hard to get them to start opening up. But once they did, what they produced was amazing, and the experience was amazing for us.

We would go back in a heartbeat—there is incredible energy there, and incredible potential. Even now, we re working on ways to continue, both the dialog we started with the students there, and with getting the work shown somehow in Canada. For starters, we ve just been reaching out to the people at PhotoEd Magazine... lots to do, but we ll keep you posted.

Participants in **The Photo Workshop** whose work was exhibited in Pingyao include Donald Smith, Monica Rooney, Robert Taylor, Ethar Ismail, Peter Lengyel, Sarah Boutiller, C. Andrea Pereyra and Gary Kaiser. *Making & Thinking: The Idea of a Photo Workshop* was published in the fall of 2023 to accompany the exhibition.

For more information about The Photo Workshop, please visit:

<https://www.rdaphoto.com/thephotoworkshop>

Rob and Nadia's video projects can be viewed at:

<https://www.youtube.com/c/NadiaandRob>

Making & Thinking can be previewed at:

<https://www.blurb.ca/books/11656053-making-thinking/9991001/8bbcf6d8717ac7c8192716c3f9a780a22b46d2fd>

For additional coverage of the 2023 Pingyao International Photography Festival, see:

<https://english.news.cn/20230919/999d797cf026418f94ef5abd09ec3c15/c.html>

A short video about the Pingyao Festival is embedded in the article link below.

The first 30 seconds show work from *Image and Memory: Photographs from Canada*, the exhibition I prepared to be shown concurrently with *Making & Thinking*:

<https://news.cqtn.com/news/2023-09-20/Pingyao-International-Photography-Festival-begins-1nfYh7vXKZa/index.html>



Rob Davidson lecturing at Pingyao, September 2023



Exhibition Image, Pingyao, September 2023