

A professional business card

Xiaojing, my 23-year-old English-speaking assistant, did the design and translation of my business card. The only thing I did was to decide on the colour, red. She did not approve. 'Black is more professional,' she insisted. I need a business card here. Everybody I meet hands me one. It becomes embarrassing not to have something to give back.

I could also use my business card when I take pictures of people in the street. Many people in this city are 'drifters' and work illegally. They don't like the idea that their picture might appear in the newspaper - or worse, on TV. But presenting them with my card, which says, in Chinese, that I'm an 'ARTIST' should reassure them and let me take all pictures I want. Being an artist from Western Europe is a safe and sound profession these days.

If you're in love you don't think too much about the future

I asked Yang-Jun, a thirty year old graphic designer if he's optimistic about the future of China.

ÔOptimistic? No, I wouldn't use that word myself. ÒExcitedÓ is a much better word to describe the present state of China.

Excitement involves optimism but it also dizziness and infatuation. If you're love, you don't think too much about the future. Yes, China is in love and that's even better than optimism or excitement.'

I try to find an explanation for the optimism that I see and feel all around me on the street.

Labourers who're up to their knees in mud whistle as they dredge a river dry with small plastic buckets. Men carting backloads of bricks off a ship smile at me when I take a photograph of them. Women who work 15 hours a day, seven days a week, say they don't mind it too much. The guy printing T-shirts in a badly ventilated shed is in a good mood. Everyone acts as if the situation they're in is a matter of chance, and certainly temporary. A few days ago I met at a reception the French Consul who lives already 20 years in China. He says that the lack of irony or bitterness has to do with the idea that the country's enormous economic growth makes opportunities for everyone at some stage. ÔIf you want to do something in China, you can. If it fails, you just try something else. The cards haven't all been dealt yet, and this makes everyone feverish with excitement.' But what will the future look like, then? Is it the hopeful scenario so many people seem to think it is?

ÔThe gap between rich and poor will widen,' he answers. ÔBut people will also work less. Look at Taiwan, which has just introduced a six-day workweek. When things go better, people don't want to work all the time, and they demand a free day and more rights generally.'

I visited a brand-new shopping mall in Guangzhou the other day. According

to the adverts it's the biggest mall in Asia. People walk arm in arm past the shop windows. There's an ice rink with young people skating on it and there are perspex sculptures of Rodin and Michelangelo everywhere. The main difference between this mall and others like it in London, New York or Amsterdam is that people don't buy anything here. They just walk, arm in arm, past the shops. Quite unlike the buying anxiety in the West.