



BACK TO ANGIE

Before becoming a journalist, Caroline Buijs organized trips to China for a living. That's how she met Chinese travel agent Angie Guo, the subject of her first professional article. Ten years later, Caroline returns to Beijing to see her again.

There she is, on a fine and sunny Sunday afternoon in Beijing: Angie Guo, standing in my hotel garden, surrounded by bamboo, little ponds and red lanterns. Give or take a few weeks, it's been exactly ten years since I last interviewed her during my vacation to China. I met Angie for the first time in 2002, when she visited our travel agency in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. I was organizing trips to China and she was our woman on the ground, arranging everything from airline and train tickets to hotels and excursions. She was very good at it, because she understood what our customers liked (a guide that takes you to the local market and explains how to prepare unfamiliar vegetables, for example). I liked her immediately. Not only because of her intelligence and sense of humor, but also because she was making her way through the Dutch snow in stockings and shoes without complaining. Her official name is Guo Huifang, but everyone in China is given an English name by their English teacher, so she is called Angie.

For years, we emailed each other almost every day for our work, exchanging news about the weather, our children (one child in Angie's case), and anything fun we'd been up to. When I was in China, we enjoyed some great meals together of course, because China has the best food in the world.

PLEASANT INDIFFERENCE

My fascination with China started in high school in the mid-1980s, when we discussed the country for my favorite subject, history. China's Imperial past, the Long March, the Gang of Four, and its disastrous Cultural Revolution: I found it all equally fascinating, and I already knew for sure I would go to China one day. More than ten years later, in 1996, I boarded the train in Moscow, Russia, with my boyfriend, now my husband, and arrived in Beijing after a week-long trip through arid Russian steppes and tundras. One of the first things I noticed in China at the time was that I wasn't >

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attracting any attention. Of course my Western appearance made me stand out in the streets, but people left me alone—very different from my experience in India, for example. Maybe it was more than being left alone, I actually felt that the Chinese reacted to me rather indifferently. I didn't mind that; it kind of made me feel I was blending in. I was absorbed into the very large masses, and as a result I quickly felt at ease in China.

Angie will forever be intertwined with my first steps in journalism. A day before I went to China on vacation in 2008, I jumped in the deep end by quitting my job at the travel agency to become a freelance journalist. But besides writing a travel brochure, I didn't have any writing assignments lined up. The interview I did with Angie during that vacation ended up being my first story as a brand-new journalist (for the Dutch magazine *Esta*). After that, our contact eventually dwindled to sending digital Christmas cards back and forth, but it's funny how you can immediately feel a connection again with someone you haven't seen for a long time.

ONE CHILD IS FINE

My hotel is located in a *hutong*, a traditional neighborhood built with narrow streets and alleys, and a wall all around it. Many *hutongs* have been demolished in recent years, but many have also been rebuilt, so that Beijing still feels familiar to me. After exchanging gifts (Dutch syrup waffles for Angie, green tea for me), we walk to a restaurant to catch up. It's a typical Sunday afternoon, and the restaurant is full of families and groups of friends—food is always a festive occasion in China—and our table is soon covered in bowls of Chinese spring onion dumplings. We show each other our family photos. Angie last saw my children when they were three and six, and I saw her son (Liu Haoyan, who goes by Chao Chao) when he was two; now all three of them are teenagers. Ten years ago, I asked her what it's like to know all your life that you can only have one child, and she replied that she couldn't even remember being told; it was just a fact of life. She also didn't think that she'd want more than one child, because she already finds life busy enough as it is. But, if she had

accidentally become pregnant anyway, she would definitely have decided to keep it, despite the problems it would cause (parents of a second child are fined, and there would be problems registering at school because a second child would, in fact, be illegal). To prevent further aging of the population and to limit the shortage of labor, it was decided in 2015 to permit having two children. Her brother and some girlfriends have had a second child, but Angie has kept it at one child and feels happy about that.

STUCK TO YOUR SMARTPHONE

While we are eating, I notice that everyone here is continually scrolling on their smartphone (a Huawei, Xiaomi, and the odd iPhone), even while eating or with other people. Ten years ago, there weren't any smartphones and now it's impossible to imagine a world without them. Impossible almost anywhere, but perhaps more so in China. I myself have a love-hate relationship with my phone, because I can tell how often it distracts me unnecessarily. Does Angie recognize that feeling? And are the Chinese newspapers or magazines writing any articles about being online less? "Yes," Angie says, "I've read stories like that. That discussion is just getting started here, but it's not a major theme yet. Personally I've noticed it was costing me too much time to respond to all my messages on Weibo [a combination of Facebook and Twitter—Ed.] so I recently stopped using it. When I would give a message from a friend a 'like', I felt I should also 'like' all my other friends' messages and I became very uneasy with all this social pressure. We try to limit Chao Chao's telephone use. To stop him from getting addicted we only let him go online for fifteen minutes at a time, but of course that often just doesn't work—he always asks for more."

A smartphone is totally indispensable in China, and chiefly for practical reasons, as it's used much more intensively than in Europe. For example, in the restaurant there's a QR code on our table that Angie only has to scan with an app on her phone—WeChat—to pay the bill. And there are more applications. On every street corner in Beijing, there's a row of orange or yellow rental bikes (such a big difference with ten years ago, when bikes had >



1. Angie and Caroline in 2008.
2. Street near Caroline's hotel. In the past, it was hard to get coffee in China; now there are lots of hip coffee shops.
3. A *hutong* in Beijing. The texts on the gate are New Year's wishes that are pasted there on Chinese New Year's Day.
4. Angie's coffee cup at work, a gift from a colleague in the Netherlands.
5. Dumpling restaurant on a Sunday afternoon.
6. Rental bikes in Beijing, close to Angie's work.



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'In China, privacy is experienced differently, and we're not just talking about the public toilet stalls without doors'



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1. Bird cages in the 798 Art District in Beijing.
2. The Purple Bamboo Park on a Sunday afternoon.
3. In the background, the building with Angie's office.
4. Angie and Caroline in 2018.
5. You can also pay with your smartphone via QR code in noodle eateries.

almost disappeared from the street scene). These bicycles can be hired, again using WeChat, by scanning the QR code under the seat, which unlocks the bike. Another handy feature: You don't have to return the bike to the same place you picked it up from. Angie uses her smartphone for everything: ordering a taxi, paying, showing her ID card, traveling by bus or metro. Apart from the fact that I can't use my phone in that many ways, I might also value my privacy more. I don't even have many customer loyalty cards, for example, because I don't want to share my personal data. But in China, privacy is experienced differently, and we're not just talking about the public toilet stalls without doors. Not only WeChat, but also the government tends to collect online data from you more readily. I discovered this as soon as I arrived in Beijing: Digital prints were made of all ten fingers and my palms, too. At my hotel, I'm only able to use the Wi-Fi if I log in with my passport number, which feels kind of strange. WhatsApp is blocked here, so Angie and I use WeChat to communicate. I also have no access to my other usual go-to apps: Gmail, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube.

LOOK AT THE WORLD

I ask Angie what she thinks about the Great Firewall of the Chinese government. "I use a VPN [virtual private network, with which you can use a different IP address to gain access to blocked sites—Ed.], she says, "to bypass the firewall. For example, I read *The New York Times* on my phone almost daily to expand my view of the world and improve my English. Not many Chinese people use VPN, as far as I can tell, but I think that anyone who wants to

install VPN can do it. I don't think many Chinese people really feel a need for YouTube. Not only because most of them here don't speak English, but also because there are many Chinese sites that offer the same thing, like Youku.com, or the TikTok app for music videos. What I particularly like about foreign sites is that there's less advertising than on ours. Sometimes the VPN doesn't work well and that's especially frustrating when I can't access a site I need for my work."

WITH THE FLOW

After lunch we take the bus to Angie's office, and on the way I notice that Chinese people are much better dressed nowadays. The suit jackets people wore always seemed two sizes too large, but now they are nicely fitted. Most young people are wandering about in the latest fashions, and while ten years ago I would still see the occasional blue Mao suit, worn by a senior citizen, now I don't see it anywhere. And I notice more things: In my hotel's *hutong*, plenty of people are still carrying around the traditional green-tea-filled jam jar, but in central Beijing it's more commonplace to see people holding a Starbucks coffee cup. In my hotel room, the thermos flask with painted flowers that used to be refilled with hot water twice a day, has been replaced by an electric kettle.

The bus comes to a standstill quite frequently. There are so many more cars compared to my first time in Beijing (owning your own car is a status symbol for the still-growing middle class in China), that it doesn't surprise me that my weather app regularly announces 'unhealthy air quality for sensitive groups'. Is this something Angie feels concerned about? "Yes, for sure," she says. "On days >

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when the pollution is severe, I feel very worried about it. If it's really bad, I wear a face mask, and I have an air purifier at home. On the positive side, smog is now getting more attention. Old, polluting factories are being closed down and solar and wind energy is on the rise. The introduction of electric cars is unfolding very rapidly here too. Luckily the air quality last winter was better than the year before."

In 2009, Angie moved from provincial town Zhengzhou to Beijing for her husband's work. She didn't think the transition was that big. "But then, I really like changes, that helps," she says. Does that have anything to do with Taoism, the Chinese philosophy that assumes that everything is always in perfect harmony and that this harmony is not fixed forever, but constantly changing? So that it's best to move along with the current of changes? "I didn't read Laozi's *Tao Te Ching* until last year," Angie says, "but I was already familiar with the idea. Perhaps it's become integrated into Chinese culture because of its long tradition, but I don't know. It may also have to do with personality; some people like change, other people don't. I have a lot of self-confidence and can feel comfortable anywhere. I always say that I'm a person with a lot of luck, but that luck comes from changes."

GROW TOGETHER

When I look back on the past ten years, the most important change in my own life has been the switch to a completely different line of work, brought on in part by reading the book *The Artist's Way* by American writer and filmmaker Julia Cameron. For Angie, too, the biggest change occurred in her work. As she became increasingly unhappy with the travel company she worked for, she started her own company (also organizing trips for foreign customers in China). "I felt that everything I was doing wasn't being appreciated or respected enough," she says, "and I knew my colleagues felt the same. I wrote a fiery letter to the management and warned them that if nothing would change, people would leave, but there was no response."

For Angie, there was also a book that pushed her to take the leap: *The Road Less Traveled* by American psychiatrist and author M. Scott Peck. "It helped me

to accept that you will encounter obstacles in your life and that you have to overcome them," she says. "So when I started to feel more and more depressed about my work, I realized that I shouldn't sit around waiting for something to change, but that I should bring about the change myself." Angie called a colleague and asked whether she thought she should start her own business. Not only did she tell Angie she should, but she also added that she would gladly go with her. Eventually Angie managed to take all her colleagues, and her customers, with her; she wasn't held back by a non-compete clause. The first thing Angie did was build her own personal work culture. "My motto is 'Work happily, grow together'," she says, "and that comes first, before making a profit. A good working atmosphere and culture of trust are very important to me. For example, we have a fruit break every afternoon. I pay for the fruit, and each department takes care of buying their own. Each department also receives a budget to do something fun together every month. Work is such a big part of your life, I think it's very important that you enjoy yourself." Angie encourages all her staff to keep learning. She bought everyone the book *Lean In* by American businesswoman Sheryl Sandberg, for example. "We'll then talk about that book for an afternoon, because my message to women is: Show yourself, don't hide, you're allowed to be confident," she says. "Besides that, I'm not much of a talker, I only give a short speech a few times a year." It is by coincidence that Angie only employs women ("The men who've applied so far have not been suitable," she says). They all work full-time; on average 38 hours a week. "Working hours are flexible," Angie says. "Some choose to start early and take a shorter lunchbreak so that they can leave on time to collect their children from school, although for many people it's still the grandparents who do that. And sometimes, if someone has a good reason to work from home, that's possible, too."

BALLROOM DANCING IN THE PARK

In the late afternoon sun, we walk from Angie's office to Zizhuyuan Park (also known as the Purple Bamboo Park) not far from her home. Parks in China are still the busy >



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and sociable places that they've always been, the perfect place to go with family or friends on Sunday afternoons. During the week, mainly grandfathers and grandmothers come here with their grandchildren. There is a striking increase in prams being pushed around, compared with the past, when the children were carried and held. There is still old-fashioned ballroom dancing in the park, to music played on small speaker boxes people bring with them. A little further on, two women are singing with the help of a karaoke machine, t'ai chi is practiced on the grass, and old men sit and play cards. Like many parks in Beijing, the Purple Bamboo Park dates from the Ming Dynasty and is very attractive because of the arched bridges, weeping willows and the lake on which you can go boating. Angie loves coming here. When the weather is nice, she goes for walks with her husband and son here in the evening. "I don't know what your teenagers are like," she says, "but mine hardly ever tells me anything about himself anymore. Even when I ask him a direct question, I don't get much of an answer. But during our walks, he often does start talking of his own accord."

BOYS AND GIRLS

Last time I interviewed Angie, I asked her what the most important difference was between her childhood and that of her parents. "The world is so much bigger and more open to me than it was to them," she told me. "I read a lot of books—with my reading club we read Chinese but also foreign literature, such as Pamuk and Murakami—and I think I understand more about different cultures. But then that was the life lesson my parents gave me: Learn more about the world in order to get to know yourself and to find out what you should do in the future." This time I'm curious to hear what Angie thinks is the biggest difference between her childhood and her son's. "In my day, China was doing much worse economically and children were not raised as comfortably," she says. "There were fewer educational opportunities. I remember that there was a lot of fighting at my primary school; every school had its own gang. That has really changed. Children are much nicer to each other and boys no longer only deal with boys but

also with girls, and vice versa. There is a strong emphasis on learning. Almost all school children take extra lessons; so there's no time to fight."

SENSE OF FREEDOM

At the end of the afternoon, we eat at a Peking duck restaurant. Talking about politics in China is always a bit uncomfortable, but I ask Angie how she feels about the change that allows President Xi Jinping to rule indefinitely. "To be honest, I don't follow politics much," she says. "You really have to be part of the political system if you want to have any influence. But as long as China is doing well, I don't see a problem—and he is no longer a young man, of course." Angie says she finds it difficult to have a good opinion about democracy. "I realize more and more that our country is complicated," she says. What she does know is that the gap between rich and poor is becoming smaller thanks to the still-growing economy. Moreover, it is official party policy to eradicate poverty. "And corruption is decreasing, and bureaucracy is also being cut back," she adds. "You can now register a new company or apply for a driver's license online. It used to cost me endless paperwork and hours of waiting. The tax rules were once rather opaque, but now you can view an instructional video on the WeChat account of the Tax Authorities."

Angie is also positive about how many people are receiving better education: they are learning better English and are more confident to start a conversation. "And people are more civilized in general; there's less spitting on the street," she says. When Angie brings me back to my hotel by taxi after dinner she tells me, "I can only speak for myself when I say that I feel free. I can do anything I want and I earn enough money to be able to afford things. I travel a lot, often go abroad and manage my business my way. I feel stronger than ten years ago." ●