

Surfing for the naked truth

A blog compiled by expats has become a hit with foreign and Chinese readers looking for a different take on China's fast-changing society. Wang Zhuoqing reports

Qingdao beach was swarming with more than a dozen brides wearing long white wedding gowns. Hundreds of families and friends joined the newly-weds at the beach to celebrate the big day. There wasn't a bikini in sight, except for one worn by a bemused looking American.

Anna Sophie Loewenberg was amazed by the events she witnessed on Qingdao beach over the Golden Week holiday in October. She decided it would be perfect for her Internet video programme on the Danwei website (www.danwei.org), a popular English blog for expatriates in Beijing and English-speaking Chinese.

"Chinese weddings are so perfect

and fabulous," said Loewenberg, who has worked in Beijing for a design and advertising company since last year. "They're so different to what they used to be. We felt we just had to film them."

Her video, called "Weddings Gone Wild," is just one of a number of mini video programmes about urban life in China published on Danwei.

Popular shows

The programmes which are part of two shows — Sexy Beijing, and the Hard Hat show — are uploaded onto the blog which is run by Jeremy Goldkorn, a South African entrepreneur who works at Standard Group, a design and advertising company in Beijing.

Sexy Beijing, launched last year, discusses anything related to marriage, love and dating.

In "Weddings Gone Wild," Loewenberg came up with the idea of interviewing brides on the beach while wearing nothing but bikini.

"We thought it would be hilarious because Chinese women never wear bikinis on the beach," she said. "And we know that what makes us laugh would also make other people laugh."

Another episode "Lost In Translation," which was shot in Beijing over June and July, explored how Chinese people came up with their English names and why they picked the ones they did.

One white-collar worker decided to call himself Frog because his teacher had said he was loud in school.

A girl in her 20s decided to call herself Samanfar and her dog No No.

"I met someone called Samantha but I thought that Samanfar sounded better," she told Su Fei, the heroine in Sexy Beijing starred by Loewenberg.

Paul Read, a Westerner working in the media in Beijing, likes the fact that the shows cover the more quirky aspects of Chinese life that are often ignored by the mainstream media, both domestic and foreign.

"They don't take themselves too seriously," he said. "Some episodes are funnier than others, but I think Su Fei is definitely a natural TV presenter. She clearly really likes being on camera."

The Western perspective allows Chinese viewers to look at the society in which they live from new angles, said Jiao Jiao, a Beijing-based reporter and fan of the website.

"I always took Chinese people's English names for granted and never saw the funny side," said Jiao, 26. "But through Su Fei's eyes I've seen how hilarious the choice of names can be."

Chinese audiences love the show because of its fresh portrayal of their country, Jiao said. "They don't make China a monster, like some Western media outlets try to do. The show reflects a more balanced picture and shows the true nature of the country and its people."

That is also the spirit of the show Sexy Beijing — to put people in the spotlight and find out who they really are, said Loewenberg.

"I am so curious about what Chinese people think, how they live their lives and how they talk about love and relationships," she said.

"It's just interesting talking to people."

Hard Hat Show

Jeremy Goldkorn takes a slightly more serious approach to his show. Donning a yellow hard hat usually worn by construction workers, he has interviewed publisher Hong Huang and avant-garde architect Ma Yansong, a handful of *autong* writers and ordinary migrant workers.

"Putting on a hat is a way of showing that our programmes are different from those of the mainstream Western media," he said.

"We're not competing with them. It's a different game. Our programmes have a lighter tone."

The Hard Hat also symbolizes the country as a construction site where new things are being built everyday. "And like a construction worker, I'm also from outside this city," he joked.

It is not the first time Goldkorn has talked of his feelings for the construction workers in Beijing. He became fluent in Chinese — both written and spoken — from chatting with migrant workers when he worked as an English teacher for a foreign company in Beijing in 1995.

In 1996, he quit the job and went



Anna Sophie Loewenberg interviews wedding guests on a Qingdao beach for a video programme on the Danwei website.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JEREMY GOLDKORN



South African entrepreneur Jeremy Goldkorn is based in Beijing.



A scene from the Hard Hat Show on the Danwei website.

to Pakistan where he rode a bicycle to Xinjiang and Qinghai in Northwest China.

As he was preparing to leave China in 1997, a friend offered him a position at a foreign language weekly magazine that focuses on art and culture. That marked the start of his career in media and advertising.

In 2002, Goldkorn was invited to join Standard Group where he still works. He has kept the blog going as a hobby.

Everyday, Goldkorn and his friend Joel Martinsen translate the latest news from the Chinese media and put it on the blog.

One of the reasons they started Danwei was to reflect the complexity of life in China. "A lot of things are going on in China but usually when the story is told in English, it's simplified," said Goldkorn.

"Any story printed in the Western media tends to be written from one of those point of views. Western media tend to present the black and white views of China. Sometimes this

is understandable, because readers in Europe or America generally don't have a good understanding of the country, so you have to simplify to tell the story.

"But you shouldn't simplify the story too much because China in the 21st century is a vital society and there are many different ways of thinking about it."