

Is this seat taken?

Photographer Michael Wolf believes the battered and rickety chairs of China embody much of its people's character and culture, writes Yasmin Ghahremani

PHOTOJOURNALIST Michael Wolf has an obsession with chairs that many people at first find puzzling. After all, the objects of his affection are not gilded antiques or sleek museum pieces. Rather, he's attracted to what he calls "bastard chairs": old, sagging, crudely patched seats like those in his recently released photo book, *Sitting In China* (Steidl, \$275).

In the book's forward Wolf explains that a few years ago when he took a picture in Beijing of a broken-down chair that had been jerry-rigged with bricks and a car seat, a crowd formed. They wanted to know why he was photographing something so "ugly", mistaking his fascination for condemnation. Later that day, the police smashed the chair to bits, calling it a shame to China.

Wolf does not see shame in the chairs he photographs. Rather, he sees what he calls Chinese vernacu-

lar culture. "They reveal something of the Chinese character—this skill of improvisation and not really caring how things look," he says. "What's important is that things work."

The book also contains portraits of owners lounging in their chairs, and candid shots of people sitting in various real-life situations. To Wolf, these images celebrate the fact that in China people still have time to sit back and chat with neighbours in a way Hong Kong people do not. "Sitting involves having time, and you hardly have that in Hong Kong because everything is so expensive," says Wolf. "People are so busy making money that they have no more time for community."

German-born Wolf has lived in Hong Kong for eight years, and has travelled extensively in China on assignments for German magazine *Stern*. Most of the photos for the

book were snapped in his spare time on those trips. One delightful exception is a shot originally intended for a *Stern* story about factory workers. It was taken at a factory that employed 7,000 workers. The cafeteria could only feed 400 at a time, so the workers ate lunch in hurried shifts.

"As an incentive for them to eat quickly and leave, they were allowed to go back to their working area and sleep," recalls Wolf. "The factory workers use every opportunity for a nap because they work very hard, often [doing] overtime, and get paid by the piece."

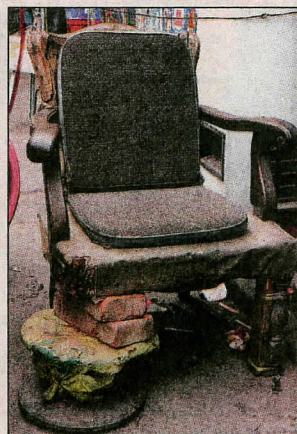
During the post-meal snooze, the slumber proved infectious. While Wolf prepared for an overhead photograph, his assistant fell asleep. Wolf nevertheless got the shot of rows of workers slumped over their desks.

His fascination with sitting extends beyond photographs. Wolf has also bought about 80 of the footstools and small chairs he's photographed, and keeps them in a personal collection. A selection of 11 of the chairs is on display at Basheer Design Books, a new art and design book shop in Wan Chai.

While most of the people Wolf

met were happy to part with their chairs for a few dozen yuan, not all were. He recalls an old village woman who owned a beautifully timeworn tree stump she said she'd been sitting on for 80 years. She sold it to Wolf anyway for 30 yuan, only to retract the offer a few hours later when she realised the stump held too many memories. "I was really surprised by this emotional attachment, which is not very Chinese," says Wolf. "And I was happy to give it back to her."

Wolf's next project continues his theme of overlooked objects that reveal vernacular culture. For *The Back Door*, which is still in its early stages, Wolf has plied the alleys of Kowloon, capturing the visual details that are uniquely Hong Kong – rubbish collectors' gloves hanging on a chain-link fence, push-carts haphazardly mended with twine, canvas shoes wedged behind exposed pipes. "Chinese people, when they look at the photographs, are all amazed," says Wolf. "They tell me, 'We've gone by these things millions of times but we were never aware that they had their own beauty.' That's one of the good functions of photography. It can open your eyes to things."



Michael Wolf says his photographs reveal something of the Chinese character: "This skill of improvisation and not really caring how things look. What's important is that things work."

