

Envisioning China

A mere babe in the China market, photography services company Rimage already has a monopoly

Lorenz Wagener is co-founder and General Manager of Rimage, a full-service product photography company in Shanghai offering product photography and follow-up digital imaging services to clients worldwide.

Why did you choose to start a photography services business in China?

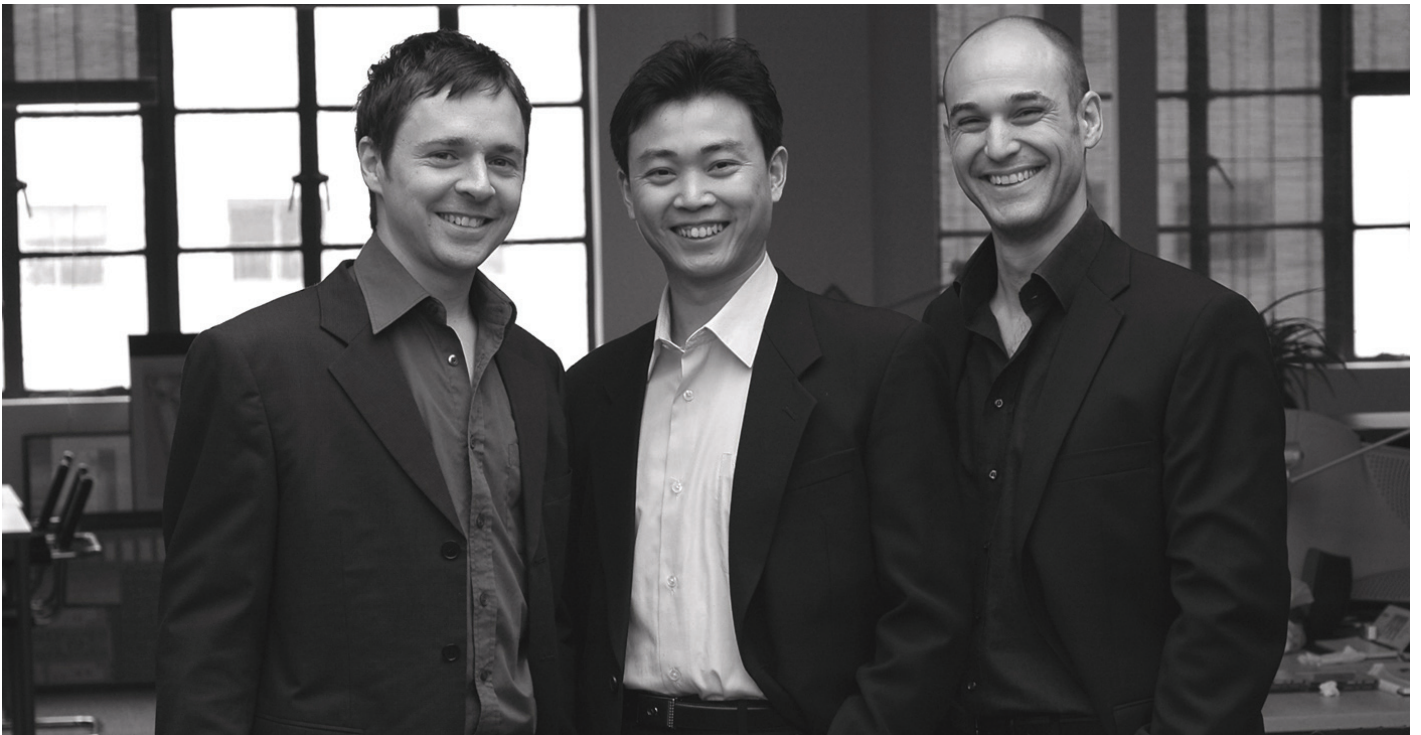
We just saw the potential. China is the top manufacturing nation worldwide, and so far there is no photography company which is exclusively doing product photography. We knew if we were able to have four or five photographers shooting at different times every day for different clients it would be very profitable, and it is also scalable. At some point, we want to open a second studio in Shanghai and then in either Shenzhen or Guangzhou.

Big European companies, like Adidas, have several thousand product shots per year. Currently all of these are done in Germany. If they

would shift product photography to Asia, though – where the products are produced – they could do it for a fraction of the cost. Sooner or later, all companies that either manufacture or purchase in China will also buy the product photography in China. Currently it's still not completely outsourceable because digital photography is still new to the big studios – they've worked for only three or four years with digital photography. Before that they had to work with film so they had get it developed and then send it to companies in different countries. It will take a few years before all the big companies say 'Ok lets shoot all in Asia'. Then it will all be digital.

Where is the market now?

Right now, because we are the first company of our kind, we have to explain to our customers why it makes sense to not only buy machines and manufacture here, but also to buy the prod-



Rimage founders Lorenz Wagener, Jiang Lei and Christoph Lienke

uct photography on top of that. It is much more simple to outsource photography to us than to shift your whole production from England or Germany to China. I think in the next one or two years there will be a big trend among international companies to not only manufacture in China, but also to buy their photography in China, too. We try to educate our clients that it just makes sense to shoot the product before it gets shipped. It not only saves them money but also gives them a time advantage. Sometimes we can even spot imperfections before the item is shipped, or sometimes you see the supplier wants to send the wrong model to the headquarters in Europe, for example, and we can help stop this from happening.

Where do you see the market in five to ten years?

I guess 80 percent of all big manufacturers or distributors dealing with high volumes will shift photography to Asia, and China will be the top location. Consider Shenzhen, which has 7,000 textile companies. Every single textile company has to have pictures of its products otherwise it cannot sell anything. Even if it's a very simple catalogue shop it has to have something to show. So it's not only the international companies paying high rates in Europe that are very interesting to us, but it's also the Chinese companies that want to sell their products more and more to Western countries. For this reason they often approach us and say 'We want you to shoot our product because you are a Western company, so you know how to photograph it as the Western consumer likes'. So it will be interesting to see in coming years which group, either the Western or the Chinese companies, will play a bigger role.

Do you foresee a lot of other competition entering the market?

So far there are no other foreign companies doing this. There are a lot of other foreign photographers, but none of them have the intention of doing what we do, because if you're a photographer you don't want to always shoot just products. You don't even need a high-end photographer to do what we do. You need someone who has an understanding of lighting and shadows and who can just work in a very focused way. That's why photographers are not our big concern. Real competition can only come from someone who would do

exactly what we do. I'm actually surprised that this hasn't happened so far because there are so many products out there that have to be photographed. There's plenty of room for companies like us.

In what ways have you had to tailor your business to fit the Chinese market?

Western companies, in general, always have a clear idea of what they want. But Chinese clients don't usually have a manual or style guide for their shooting. They just say 'We need these pictures, how much will it cost?' This is very difficult because you can shoot the same product it in two minutes or in two hours and you will see a difference in quality. If you go to a painter and you say 'Please paint me a painting in 10 minutes', it will look different than if you say 'I'll give you five hours, and I'll pay you five hours'. It's quality verses quantity. As soon as our clients understand that, our job becomes easier.

Another issue is copyright. Chinese clients usually think when you buy a photograph from someone then the photograph belongs to you, which is just not correct. Chinese law follows international regulations, which say that the owner of the photograph is always the person who created the photograph. So we have to make sure our Chinese clients understand that they have to be very careful when they just assume that it's their picture. This is something that is completely new to the Chinese market. Most local photo studios leave their clients in the dark and retain full usage rights.

What are your projections for growth in the next 5 years?

By the end of next year we want to open a second studio in Shanghai. Then we hope to open a new studio every year for the next six or seven years. So our long-term plan is to have six studios by 2010 throughout Asia. This way, if a big company like Ikea says 'We would like to outsource all photography to Rimage but we also need photography done in Singapore – Can you do that?' We can say 'Yes', because we have a studio there. Then we would be able to be the first company not only in Asia but worldwide who offers international photography services with one point of contact. This approach is indeed new to the photography business. ■

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