

EXPAT EXPERT



The country's transformation over the past three decades is recorded in the photos taken by Gilbert van Kerckhove. Local residents (left) mostly dress in dark-colored suits in the 1980s. Kerckhove poses in the China office (center) for the Belgian company ACEC in Beijing in 1981. Beijing's Chang'an Avenue (right) in the early 1980s.

Chronicling urban transformation

A Belgian business strategist who came to Beijing more than three decades ago has found time to maintain a photographic record of the changes in the Chinese capital. **Liu Xiangrui** reports.

As one of the earliest foreign business-people to venture into China after its opening-up, 68-year-old Belgian business strategist Gilbert van Kerckhove has not only witnessed, but also played an important part in, the country's tremendous transformation over the years. Originally from Ghent in Belgium, where he got a master's degree in electronic engineering in 1973, Van Kerckhove has spent a big part of his life working for multinationals in foreign countries, including Brazil, Nigeria, Spain, Thailand and Myanmar.

Despite the discouragement and doubts expressed by his family and friends, who viewed China as a poor and unsafe country back then, Van Kerckhove accepted the task of setting up a China office for the Belgian company ACEC in Beijing in 1980.

"I did not plan to stay for so long. Then, one more year and one more year, and I am still here," he says in his home office in Beijing.

Since then, Van Kerckhove has lived on and off in China for more than 30 years, working mostly in Beijing, but also in Hong Kong and Shanghai.

Even though he has worked in other countries in between, he always chose to come back to China, which he calls his "second home".

In his early years in China, he was involved in many major construction projects, such as Line 3 of Shanghai's subway and Jinmao Tower, one of the landmark skyscrapers in Shanghai, when he was the regional director of French company Alstom's East China branch.

In 1999, he started his own company, which offers management and strategy consulting to both foreign and Chinese organizations.



Gilbert van Kerckhove with his family and friends at his home in Beijing. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Van Kerckhove's international background and rich experience in business are also valued by Beijing's municipal authorities.

For many years, he has been assisting the city in economic studies and foreign-investment promotion.

He was deeply involved in the preparations for the 2008 Beijing Olympics from the early stages, assisting the city's government in fundraising, tendering and economic planning related to the Games.

Appointed as a senior consultant for the Olympic Economy Office of the municipal government, Van Kerckhove called himself a "lobbyist" for Beijing and a "bridge" between the administration and foreign businesses.

He used his own international connections and worked hard to collect feedback on foreign concerns. He also explained in detail to the foreign community the Chinese government's goals, guidelines and interest in seeking foreign involvement in major projects.

He recalls how the authorities carried on with the preparations for the Games even when Beijing was threatened by the SARS epidemic in 2003.

Many offices and public venues had to be closed down for safety concerns. At times, for convenience, the tendering team for the Beijing Games gathered at Van Kerckhove's home office to hold discussions.

"Some major projects,

including the Bird's Nest and the Water Cube, were discussed at my home," says Van Kerckhove.

Van Kerckhove still maintains close ties with, and offers consultancy to, several central government and Beijing municipal departments.

"I have a big mouth and a bit of courage," says Van Kerckhove, explaining how he won the trust of the Chinese government.

"My approach is simple. I offer what is good and bad for them, and give opinions honestly and complain constructively. Then I offer solutions and start working."

For his contributions to the development of China and the local economy, he has received a number of prestigious

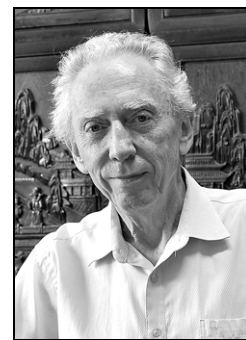
awards and appointments from the Chinese government.

He received the Friendship Award from the central government in 2005. The award is the highest honor given to foreigners who have made significant contributions to China's development.

After spending decades in China, he has accumulated keen insights about Chinese culture, society and government administration.

Nowadays, he is a frequent speaker on a large variety of topics related to the Chinese economy, business environment, society, mentality and the urban development of Beijing.

He gives briefings to business executives and lectures in



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Gilbert van Kerckhove, Belgian business strategist

a few Chinese universities.

Now living in Beijing with his Chinese wife, Van Kerckhove enjoys life like a local.

"This is my home. Beijing is very cosmopolitan now. It offers everything you need, and I can enjoy life here," says Van Kerckhove, who was granted a Chinese green card in 2008.

He says life today in Beijing is in sharp contrast to the early days, when he had to endure a monotonous life outside work as there were few things to do and places to visit back then.

Van Kerckhove is very impressed by how the city itself has transformed over the years. One of the most remarkable changes has been the transformation of Beijing's Third Ring Road from

farmland to numerous skyscrapers, he says.

As a fan of photography, he has documented the changes in China through his lens.

"I've taken a lot of pictures to show how a city changes," he says.

"Even young people in China have no idea how their country has transformed in the past 30 years. There is no comparison in the world."

Though he has a busy schedule, Van Kerckhove has traveled to many places in China, such as the Shaolin Temple in Henan province and Xi'an city in Shaanxi province.

Meanwhile, he has set up a website of his pictures, and encourages people to contribute photos recording China's society and landscapes.

Van Kerckhove closely follows and comments on issues related to China, including the environment. An active blogger, he published a book called *Toxic Capitalism* in 2012, which is a study of environmental issues and over-consumption.

"As an engineer, I've always cared about waste and pollution," he says.

Van Kerckhove says he spent four months doing research for the book, and often worked late during that time.

The business strategist, who is a regular at the gym, also enjoys biking in Beijing.

Besides business, he is also actively involved in many social associations in the city, such as the Rotary Club.

He has even established a club called "Old China Hands" to bring together expatriates who have lived in China for more than 10 years.

"Everybody (in the club) has his experiences and problems to share. It's good fun to talk to them," he says.

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TECHNOLOGY

Smart cameras help to solve and prevent crimes in Shenzhen

By **DENG ZHANGYU**
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Where is the least likely place that criminals would dare to go in the world? Probably China's Shenzhen. Why? Because it only needs a few seconds to locate a criminal among millions of people after the city's surveillance cameras were embedded with intelligent chips in November.

"In 2018, Shenzhen will be probably the safest city in the world," says Chen Ning, who helps maintain the intelligent-camera system for Shenzhen's public security bureau in Longgang district.

Like God's Eye in the movie *The Fast and the Furious 7* that can track a target through all the cameras in a city, Chen's intelligent-camera system can detect a criminal in less than a second once he's in view of the lens.

In November, all the monitoring cameras in Longgang district in Shenzhen were embedded with intelligent chips designed by Shenzhen-based IntelliFusion Technologies Company, where Chen is CEO. Every camera in Shenzhen will be so equipped in 2018.

Chen says the system is based on artificial intelligence and big data. Instead of simply recording suspects' movements, they're able to discover suspects and send alarms to police or security staff. It also offers analyses of the suspects.

People tracking like what we usually see in sci-fi movies has become reality in China.

"China is definitely ahead of the curve when it comes to applying visual intelligence to the security field," says Chen.

In the past few months, some long-wanted suspects have been found by these

intelligent cameras after they entered Longgang, according to Shenzhen police records.

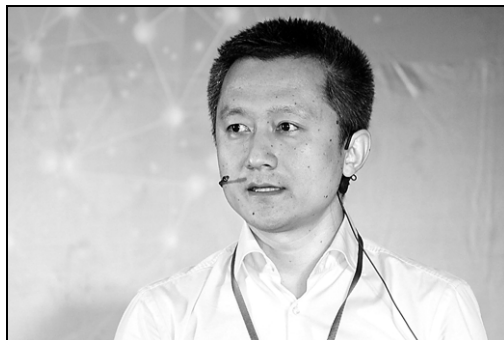
Chen says his primary business is now cooperating with governments in the security field. The upcoming G20 summit in Hangzhou, capital of Zhejiang province, in September will use the intelligent-security system.

Such countries as Australia and Thailand are also turning to him for cooperation and assistance, adds Chen.

The 41-year-old returned from Silicon Valley in 2014 and established his business, focusing on visual intelligence and intelligent chips with his partner Tian Dihong, an expert in computer vision.

Chen and Tian are longtime friends. They both studied for their PhDs at Georgia Institute of Technology.

After graduation, they worked for different companies



Chen Ning, co-founder of IntelliFusion Technologies. His products are used by Shenzhen's security bureau. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

in the United States.

For many years, they have argued constantly about which would be more important, intelligent chips or computer vision. In 2013, they saw a bright future in the field of artificial intelligence and were

determined to set up their own company.

They established IntelliFusion in Shenzhen in 2014, a place labeled "China's Silicon Valley" because it attracts lots of technology startups from home and abroad. Several

months later, the public security bureau in Shenzhen's Longgang district began to use their visual-intelligence system.

In May, an international supermarket brand in the area equipped their cameras with intelligent chips. Security guards of the supermarket caught 20 thieves in the first week based on the alarm messages sent by intelligent cameras. Two were caught stealing goods.

"There are almost no thieves in that supermarket. It's very interesting that other stores near the supermarket complain that robbers go to their stores since that they dare not go to the supermarket," says Chen.

The intelligent cameras can recognize a man from how he walks and even a view of his back. They also can learn by themselves like humans do

from constant practice, says Chen. They have the ability to give a timeline of a man's movements over two years in a few seconds based on facial recognition.

"Probably there will be no more lost children in cities equipped with these intelligent cameras," says Chen, a father of three.

These "cameras with brains" will frighten criminals, thieves and gangs trafficking children, he says.

He is also confident that in the near future China will become one of the safest nations in the world because it has installed cameras in cities during its modernization.

"In the field of artificial intelligence, the whole world is competing on the same level. But in the application of this technology in the security field, China is ahead," says Chen.