



## Another West Lake

by Dalang Shao



Published in *LensWork* and *LensWork Extended* #128

### Commentary

I'm sure there must be some reason in the history of cameras and photography why the round image that every lens projects was, for mysterious reasons, cropped into a quadrilateral in film and prints. It may be as simple as the ease with which manufacturing can cut a straight line in the production of film and paper. As I say, there must be *some* reason, but whatever it is there is no question that **we are not bound by it**. In fact, in the production of our artwork, we are not restricted to any particular shape at all.

But think about this: of all the photographs you have ever seen in your life (fine art or otherwise), what percentage of them would you say are a quadrilateral — either a square or a rectangle? I'd bet something north of 99%. Only a tiny percentage of photographs are round; even fewer oval-shaped; and even fewer irregular shapes. Even the occasional artsy inclusion of a Polaroid border, or the brush strokes of a platinum/palladium print, are typically imposed on a rectangular shaped image.

It's a shame really that so few images are round. It's a lovely constriction inside which to compose. Consider this image by Chinese photographer Dalang Shao from his landscape project of the historic West Lake scenic area near Hangzhou, China. The composition consists of two dominant straight lines — the line of trees and the line of fishing nets. Each of these dominant linear shapes are composed of more or less parallel vertical lines in the forms

of the trees and the posts. All of this linearity and straightness is emphasized in his image in contrast to the round border edge. Said another way, the four edges of an artificially imposed quadrilateral image frame would tend to compete with the linear shapes provided by nature and the fisherman singing in the real world. Fortunately, in this round image, the linearity of the subject is more visible.

Curiously enough, Shao's project also includes a number of images with curved subjects — trees, arched bridges, boats, round fishing nets — all of whose arcs and curves are emphasized when they are placed close to the edge of the circular image frame.

I don't know nearly enough about the physiology and psychology of shape perception to understand how all of this works in our perceptive mind, but I do know it seems that a tremendous and untapped potential lies in the possibility of using image shapes other than quadrilaterals. Just because that's what our camera produces, doesn't mean it's what we have to produce. The trick, of course, is to make the shape of our photographs an integral part of the artwork and not just some gimmick that interferes with the emotional content and our expressive intent.