

WANG LEI

STORY BY GRAHAM WEBSTER PORTRAIT BY THOMAS LEE



It's August in Beijing, almost 32°C (90°F) outside; but on an indoor slope in Beijing's upscale Shunyi suburb, 30-year-old Wang Lei, China's only pro snowboarder, is on his snowboard, giving advice to a younger rider.

Riders aren't the only people seeking Burton-sponsored Wang's advice; when he's not competing he's helping places like this Shunyi refuge build their terrain parks. This winter, he'll give demos to promote snowboarding at China's growing number of resorts, some in the mountainous far north or the less snowy hills surrounding Beijing. He even works occasionally with the national team, trying to inject some of snowboarding's characteristic laid-back culture into their strict competition-oriented training.

Wang has been snowboarding for 10 years, but he's been on the slopes for almost 20. At age 10, a coach for the Army ski jumping team noticed Wang's potential in the twisting-turning-flipping jump events known as aerals. Four years later, a melting patch of snow on the ski jump caught his skis and sent him bashing at flight velocity into the metal rail-

ing, knocking him unconscious for several minutes. "I was feeling hurt, but I didn't know where," he remembers—until he noticed the blood dripping through the left elbow of his aerodynamic jump suit.

It was eight hours and 120 km on old roads to the hospital. "For two years, everything stopped," Wang says. After seven surgeries, which rebuilt his mangled arm with tissue from his leg, he finally recovered. When he returned to skiing, he was two years behind in training and still a contender. But soon he discovered snowboarding and developed a playful, fluid riding style. Snowboarding fit his mellow and fun-loving personality, and he quickly became a snowboarder, staying on skis mainly to support his snowboarding habit.

Snowboarding has a growing following among young and adventurous Beijingers, and Wang reports seeing more and more snowboarders on the slopes since he started in 1997. "Snowboarding in China is growing up well," he says. "It just needs time."